NATION

As Delhi gasps, 'no PUC, no fuel' kicks in

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BUSINESS

Focus now on rebuilding: IndiGo CEO to staffers

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SPORTS

Two sides clash in the fifth and final T20 International in Ahmedabad today

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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K'taka passes 1st ever anti-hate speech bill

Violators to pay Rs 1L, get jail term; Oppn says cops are now Hitler

BELAGAVI, 18 DEC

The Karnataka Assembly on Thursday passed the country's maiden anti-hate speech legislation, which the BJP termed as a "Brahmastra" against the Opposition and the media.

The Hate Speech and Hate Crimes (Prevention) Bill was passed in the House amid din by the BJP MLAs, with the government referring to the Supreme Court observations against hateful remarks.

It has a provision for a fine up to Rs one lakh and a jail term up to seven years. Home Minister G Parameshwara said the provision for 10 years jail term in the event of repeated offence has been reduced to seven years.

The bill, cleared by the cabinet on 4 December was presented in the House by Parameshwara on 10 December.

Any public expression – electronic or otherwise - with an intention to cause injury, disharmony or feelings of enmity or hatred or ill-will against person alive or dead, class or group of persons or community, to meet any prejudicial interest, is hate speech, according to the bill

Hate speech and hate crimes lead to murders, create social unrest and vitiate the society, he noted.

Home Minister G Parameshwara and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar in the Suvarna Soudha, Belagavi on Thursday **PHOTO: SALAR**

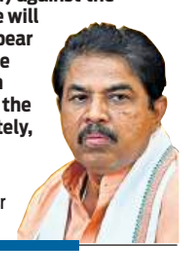
Leader of Opposition R Ashoka said the law will turn police into "Hitler".

It violates the constitutional provision of freedom of expression, the BJP leader argued. Even cartoons and pictures have not been spared. It will also attack the freedom of press and curb digital freedom, he claimed.

"There will be rampant extortion. There will be no bail but only jail under this law. What else should we expect from those who imposed Emergency in this country," Ashoka said.

BJP MLA V Sunil Kumar sought to know what if someone quotes hate contents from a book, which can be religious. Parameshwara said they will also be covered under the law. *—PTI*

> **This is a Brahmastra (ultimate deadly weapon) against the Opposition. We will be the first to bear the brunt of the law and next in the line will be the media. Ultimately, it is vote bank politics**
>
> -R Ashoka, Leader of Opposition



Union Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan speaks in the Lok Sabha as Opposition members throw papers in protest **PHOTO: PTI**

LS clears G RAM G Bill

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Lok Sabha passed a Bill which replaces the 20-year-old MGNREGA with a new initiative that guarantees rural jobs for 125 days every year amid protests by the Opposition. Union Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan asserted that the change was necessary to fix shortcomings in the scheme.

Responding to the discussion on the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Bill on Thursday, Rural Development Minister Chouhan lashed out at the Congress, claiming that it had "killed" the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi and had used his name for political gains.

Chouhan said that during the UPA rule, MGNREGA was riddled with corruption.

"Funds were not allotted to states as expected. As per the MGNREGA Act, 60 per cent of the funds were to be spent on labour and 40 per cent on material.

But only 26 per cent was spent on material and funds were siphoned off," he said.

Chouhan said the G RAM G Bill was introduced after extensive deliberations as it was felt that Rs 10 to 11 lakh crore should not be spent on merely paying wages, but used for creating assets. *— PTI*

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SC urges ECI to extend SIR deadline

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Supreme Court on Thursday called on the Election Commission of India (ECI) to consider a "sympathetic view" regarding pleas to extend the deadline for submitting enumeration forms under the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) 2026 of electoral rolls, acknowledging the "ground realities" in states like Uttar Pradesh and Kerala. The ECI had revised Kerala's deadline to the same day, with the draft voter list set to be published on 23 December, while Uttar Pradesh's new deadline was 26 December. Advocated Kapil Sibal raised concerns that 25 lakh electors could be excluded in Kerala. The court adjourned for a hearing untill 6 January. *—Agencies*

Rohingya teen dies after being stabbed 19 times

HYDERABAD, 18 DEC

A 19-year-old Rohingya man was allegedly stabbed to death following a drunken brawl, with police suspecting another Rohingya man in the case. The victim was attacked with a knife at their camp in Balapur around 1.30 am on Wednesday and was stabbed 19 times, resulting in his instant death "At the time of the incident, both were in drunken condition and quarelled over some reason. The suspect stabbed the victim multiple times with a knife due to which he died on the spot," a police official at Balapur police station said. Officials confirmed that suspect has been taken into custody, and they are verifying details. *—PTI*

Students skilled in music can pursue engineering at IITM

CHENNAI, 18 DEC

IIT-Madras director V Kamakoti has announced that students proficient in traditional music can now pursue engineering at the institute and encouraged parents to foster a musical education in their children from a young age. Speaking at the 93rd annual South Indian Music Conference and Festival of the Indian Fine Arts Society, in Chennai, Kamakoti emphasised the connection between music and science, particularly mathematics. "We are working a lot on this," he stated. "We are focusing on interdisciplinary education at IIT-Madras. Operation Sindoor is an example of this, as 10-11 disciplines of engineering were involved in it." *—PTI*

'Statue of Unity' sculptor Ram Sutar dies at 100

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Noted sculptor Ram Sutar, famed for designing the Statue of Unity in Gujarat, passed away late Wednesday at his Noida residence, his son Anil Sutar confirmed. He was 100 and suffering from age-related ailments. Born on 19 February, 1925, in Gondur village, Dhule district, Maharashtra, Sutar displayed an early interest in sculpting. A gold medallist from Mumbai's JJ School of Art and Architecture, he went on to create several iconic works. His celebrated statues include Mahatma Gandhi in a meditative pose, the Statue of Unity, and Chhatrapati Shivaji on horseback at the Parliament premises. *—PTI*

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Indian pharma gets duty-free access to Oman

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

India's pharma exports to Oman will get a boost as the Gulf nation will provide duty-free access to key medicines and vaccines, besides fast-tracking of regulatory approvals for domestic goods.

Core active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) like penicillin, streptomycin, tetracycline and erythromycins also will get duty-free access in Oman's market.

The comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA) was signed on Thursday in Muscat during the talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on ways to promote the two countries strategic partnership.

As per the agreement, products approved by USFDA, EMA (European Medicines Agency), UK's MHRA (Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency), and Australia's TGA (Therapeutic Goods Administration) will be eligible for 90-day fast-track marketing authorisations without prior inspections, subject to submission of complete assessment dossiers.

Where inspections are required, there is a target that Indian pharma products may get approval within 270 working days.

Oman will accept GMP (Good Manufacturing Practice) certificates and inspection outcomes issued by recognised regulatory authorities, as it will reduce duplication and compliance costs.

Oman's pharmaceutical market is valued at USD 302.84 million in 2024 and is projected to reach USD 473.71 million by 2031, growing at a CAGR of 6.6 per cent (2025-31). *— PTI*

PM Narendra Modi being conferred with the Order of Oman, the Sultanate's uniquely distinct civilian honour, by Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tarik, in Muscat on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

Nuclear energy opens for private sector

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Parliament on Thursday passed the nuclear energy bill, with the Rajya Sabha giving its nod to the legislation seeking to open the tightly-controlled civil nuclear sector for private participation.

The Upper House passed the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill by a voice vote, while rejecting several amendments moved by Opposition members to send the proposed legislation to a parliamentary committee. It was passed in the Lok Sabha on Wednesday.

Replying to a discussion on the bill, Minister of State, Department of Atomic Energy, Jitendra Singh, said it aims at making India self-reliant in nuclear energy and reducing dependence on other sources of energy.

He added that India's energy requirement will be highly dependent on nuclear sources, with AI coming in a big way. *—PTI*

Hijabi woman can go to hell: Neta

PATNA, 18 DEC

Union Minister Giriraj Singh has defended Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar for physically pulling down the face veil of a young doctor, stating, "Nitish Kumar did the right thing. Whether the girl refuses the job or goes to hell, that's her choice."

The victim, Dr Nusrat Parveen, a newly recruited AYUSH doctor, was one of ten selected to receive an appointment letter directly from the CM on 15 December. As she approached, he pointed to her veil and exclaimed, "What is this?" before pulling it down.

- Union Minister Giriraj Singh said, "Nitish Kumar did the right thing. Whether the girl refuses the job or goes to hell, that's her choice."

Parveen's brother said that she was distressed by the incident, adding that she is determined not to join the service

The incident has drawn widespread attention online, prompting reactions across the political spectrum. Bihar Health Minister insisted that the CM has "always respected women." Meanwhile, Congress's Ajay Rai described Nishad's comment as "outrageously anti-women," and SP spokesperson Sumaiyya Rana filed a complaint with Lucknow police against both Nishad and Kumar. *—PTI*

>More on Pg 3

Woman killed by tenants for asking rent in UP

GHAZIABAD, DEC 18

The police have discovered the body of a 48-year-old woman stuffed in a red bag, allegedly murdered by her tenants when she went to their flat to collect rent.

According to Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) Nandgram Upasna Pandey, the deceased Deepshikha and her husband, Umesh Sharma, owned two flats in the Aura Chimera Society, one of which was rented to a couple. Deepshikha reportedly went to the flat to collect the rent; however, as she had not returned, her domestic help and neighbours went to the rented flat, where they found her body concealed in a bag.

Sources said the accused, Ajay Gupta, 35 and Akriti Gupta, 33, had intended to dispose of the body but were stopped by the house help and other residents. A video of the confrontation has circulated on social media, with bystanders questioning the couple. *—PTI*

NIA arrests ninth accused in Red Fort blast case

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Thursday arrested Yasir Ahmad Dar, a close associate of the Red Fort blast perpetrator Umar-un-Nabi, which is the ninth arrest in connection with the deadly attack. Dar, a resident of Shopian in Jammu and Kashmir, was detained in Delhi and charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS).

According to NIA officials, Dar played an active role in the conspiracy behind the car bomb explosion on 10 November, which resulted in 15 fatalities and numerous injuries. The agency stated, "Dar had allegedly taken an oath to carry out self-sacrificial operations."

The preliminary investigation reveals that Dar maintained contact with other accused individuals, including the deceased Umar-un-Nabi and key conspirator Mufti Irfan. It may be noted that following recent searches in Jammu and Kashmir, the NIA has arrested eight accused, including four doctors. Meanwhile, Delhi court has ordered Dar who was produced before it to remain in NIA custody until 26 December to facilitate further interrogation. *—PTI*

DETECTED NEAR NAVAL ZONE

Chinese GPS tracker found on seagull in Karwar

KARWAR, 18 DEC

Security agencies and forest officials have launched an inquiry after a Chinese-made GPS tracking device was found attached to a seagull near the coastal belt of Karwar in Uttara Kannada district, close to a sensitive naval zone. Preliminary findings, however, suggest the device was intended for scientific research rather than espionage.

The incident came to light on Wednesday when residents noticed a tagged seagull resting near Thimmakka Garden by the beach. They alerted the Marine Wing of the Forest Department, which captured the bird.

The GPS tracker bore markings linked to the Research Centre for Eco-Environmental Sciences under Chinese Academy of Sciences, indicating its use for ecological and academic studies. "The tracker appears to have been fitted to study the movement, feeding patterns, and migration routes of seagulls. At this stage, there is no evidence of espionage activity," police said.

The bird has been shifted to the Marine Forest Division office for observation. Officials are trying to formally contact the research institution to clarify the study's origin, timeline, and scope.

This is not the first such case; in November last year, a war eagle fitted with a tracking device was spotted near Baithkol port, later confirmed as a wildlife research project. *—PTI*

QUOTE of THE DAY

"If you (BJP) have guts, you remove Mahatma Gandhi's photo from the currency note

—DK SHIVAKUMAR
Deputy Chief Minister on MGNREGA renaming row

Social Boycott Prevention Bill passed in State Assembly

'Caste panchayats' can face upto Rs 1 lakh fine, 3-year jail

BELAGAVI, 18 DEC

The Karnataka Legislative Assembly on Thursday unanimously passed the Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Bill.

Introduced on 12 December by Social Welfare Minister H C Mahadevappa, the bill defines social boycott as any oral or written act of discrimination within a community and provides for up to three years' imprisonment and a fine of up to Rs 1 lakh.

It bars gatherings or assemblies intended to deliberate on or enforce social boycott and mandates that courts hear victims on sentencing before passing orders.

Social Welfare Minister Mahadevappa termed the bill historic, saying it promotes equality and protects marginalised sections.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said it targets social boycotts, harassment and punishments imposed by caste panchayats.

The legislation received bipartisan support, with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and JD(S) members backing it. BJP State President BY Vijayendra said both the ruling party and the Opposition supported it. *—Agencies*

CAN'T CHANGE BMIC CORRIDOR: DKS

DyCM DK Shivakumar said that the government can't make any changes to the Bengaluru Mysuru Infrastructure Corridor (BMIC) in view of the Supreme Court ruling. "The project was approved in 1995 when HD Deve Gowda was the chief minister," Shivakumar said. Congress MLC Madhu Made Gowda had asked if the BMIC project was required in view of the new National Highway 75. "A three-member bench of Supreme Court has passed an order to allow completion of BMIC in its original form. Hence, the government can't make any changes," Shivakumar said

88 COPS CHARGED FOR CRIMES: HM

Home Minister G Parameshwara on Thursday said criminal cases have been registered against 88 police personnel and officers for their alleged involvement in criminal activities. He said the accused have been arrested and suspended, and will be dismissed from service if the charges are proved. Parameshwara was replying to a question raised by MLC TA Saravan in the Legislative Council.

DKS REFUTES CLAIMS OF PRISON PERKS

DyCM DK Shivakumar dismissed the notion that some inmates were receiving preferential treatment in prisons across the State. BJP MLC Kishore Kumar Puttur raised the issue of prisoners in jails having access to electronic gadgets including telephones, referring to a newspaper article linking a call to the DyCM. "I don't receive any such hotline calls from jails," Shivakumar responded. "I don't know what the media has carried. I have been a minister for Prisons and I know what transpires in jails. Don't link that to me."

WAR OF WORDS

BYV accuses Cong of graft, DKS calls him 'collection king'

BELAGAVI, 18 DEC

Accusing the Congress government of rampant corruption, State BJP President BY Vijayendra on Thursday alleged that the money collected through "loot and by emptying the State's coffers" is being paid to the party High Command, to continue in power.

Hitting back, Deputy CM DK Shivakumar called Vijayendra as "king of collection, and held him responsible for ruining his father and former chief minister BS Yediyurappa's name.

"We have been saying that if the Congress is in power in the State, it will turn into an ATM for their High Command," Vijayendra told press. "Hundreds of crores were misappropriated in Valmiki ST Development Corporation. After that, one scam after the other is taking place."

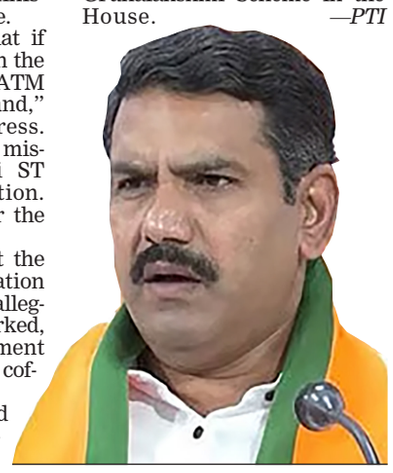
"You may be aware that the State contractors' association had also written a letter alleging commission," he remarked, claiming that development works were stalled and the coffers were empty.

Vijayendra also called Siddaramaiah the "outgoing CM".

"Which coffer is empty?" Shivakumar retorted. "Let him come and speak in the Assembly, instead of running away somewhere. Should I reveal their collections, accounts and transfers? He should speak within his limits as the party President."

"If there is any king for collections, it is Vijayendra," he alleged.

Shivakumar also defended Minister Lakshmi Hebbalkar, whom the BJP accused of giving false information about Gruhalakshmi Scheme in the House. *—PTI*



Lawyer dies after being hit by speeding car

BENGALURU, 18 DEC

A 61-year-old High Court lawyer, N Ramachandra Reddy, died after being struck by a speeding car in Bengaluru on 17 December at 7.28pm. The incident, captured on CCTV, occurred near RMV Club in Dollars Colony, Sanjaynagar. The car, allegedly driven recklessly by 18-year-old Shishir Patil, hit Reddy as he crossed the road before striking a scooter. The collision injured the rider, Bharath, 19, and pillion, Swati, 23. Patil then lost control and crashed into two parked cars. Reddy died at MS Ramaiah Hospital, while the scooterists were treated at Shirdi Sai Hospital. Patil, who sustained minor injuries, reported to police. A case has been registered under the BNS for reckless driving. *—PTI*

Bike rider killed in wild elephant attack in MM Hills

MYSURU, 18 DEC

A 43-year-old bike rider lost his life when a wild elephant attacked him near Jallipalya, within the Hoogyam wildlife range of the MM Hills wildlife sanctuary in Hanur taluk, Chamarajnagar district, on Thursday. The victim, identified as Shivamurthy from Jallipalya, was riding towards Makanapalya in neighbouring Tamil Nadu when the incident occurred. The authorities responded swiftly to the scene, with both Hanur Police and officials from the forest department arriving shortly after the incident was reported. A police case has been registered, and an investigation is currently underway to determine the circumstances surrounding this unfortunate event. Local residents have expressed concern over the increasing number of human-wildlife conflicts in the region *—Salar News*

D'sthala complainant released on bail

SHIVAMOGGA, 18 DEC

The Dharmasthala mass burials complainant, CN Chinnaiah, has been released on bail from Shivamogga district jail after being arrested on charges of perjury in the case on Thursday.

The bail was granted after Chinnaiah's family furnished a surety bond of Rs 1 lakh, in compliance with the court's order, officials said. The necessary documents were submitted on Tuesday, following which prison authorities processed his release. Chinnaiah walked out of the jail on Thursday morning after completing procedural requirements.

On 24 November, Chinnaiah was granted bail by the court in Belthangady.

Legal observers said that the bail does not weaken the investigation. Police officials reiterated that the investigation into the Dharmasthala cases is ongoing. Chinnaiah, they said, will be required to appear before investigators whenever summoned.

Last month, the Special Investigation Team (SIT) constituted to probe the allegations of multiple rapes, murders and burials in Dharmasthala, submitted a 3,900-page report to the Judicial First-Class Magistrate Court in Belthangady, naming six persons as accused, including Chinnaiah.

Chinnaiah, a former sanitation worker, originally claimed that dozens of bodies of women and minors, some bearing marks of sexual assault, were secretly buried between 1995 and 2014 in Dharmasthala.

The SIT, however, found major inconsistencies in his statements recorded and evidence. *—PTI*

SEERS PITCH FOR PARAMESHWARA FOR CM'S POST

TUMAKURU, 18 DEC

A group of seers from various mutts met on Thursday in Tumakuru to pitch for Home Minister G Parameshwara for the CM post, amid the ongoing power tussle within the ruling Congress. The meeting was a show of unity from seers representing Lingayat, Vokkaliga, backward and Dalit communities, among others.

"Tumakuru district in-charge Minister Parameshwara should be made the CM. The move will also give the party credit for doing justice to a backward community (as Parameshwara is a Dalit)," Hanumanthanatha Swamiji of Kunchitigara Maha Samsthana Matha, Yelerampura said. "The seers, of Mutts maths, irrespective of caste or any other affiliation, want Parameshwara as CM ... it will also help for the all round development of the district." Parameshwara, who had served as State Congress chief, had last month said that he too was in the race for CM's post. *—PTI*

'30 LEGISLATORS IN ATTENDENCE'

'Like-minded' Congress MLAs attend dinner hosted by Jarkiholi

BELAGAVI, 18 DEC

'Like-minded' ruling Congress legislators met for dinner hosted by senior Minister Satish Jarkiholi at a hotel in Belagavi, amid the ongoing power tussle within the party over the Chief Minister post.

At least 30 legislators attended the dinner hosted by Jarkiholi on Wednesday night. While some described it as a casual dinner meeting, others said political developments in Karnataka were discussed.

Jarkiholi is considered close to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah. Those present included Siddaramaiah's son and MLC Yathindra Siddaramaiah, MLA KN Rajanna, among others. Siddaramaiah was not present at the dinner as he was unwell, sources said.

The dinner meeting came a week after over 30 Congress legislators, including some ministers, attended a dinner hosted by Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on the outskirts of Belagavi.

"There is nothing special about it. Giving a dinner to like-minded people is common. Such meetings keep happening. We too had one yesterday. Not much political discussion took place," Jarkiholi told reporters here on Thursday.

However, Rajanna, a former minister and CM Siddaramaiah loyalist, said political matters were discussed during the dinner. "Why would we meet otherwise? Would we meet just for food?" Yathindra said such meetings are common during legislative sessions. "Recently, Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao invited me, and I attended." *—PTI*

2 buses found with same licence plate in Kolar

KOLAR GOLD FIELDS, 18 DEC

In a scene echoing the Telugu film Middle Class Abbayi, a woman Motor Vehicle Inspector intercepted two buses bearing identical number plates in Kolar district. Pooja, posted with the ARTO in KGF, seized the vehicles after routine checks raised suspicion. The incident occurred on Sunday evening near the Kotilingeswara temple in Kammasandra, where Pooja spotted a casual contract bus. Having earlier seen another bus with the same registration number, she photographed it and alerted colleague Munikrishna.

When the bus returned, a second vehicle displaying the identical number plate arrived from Venkatagiri Kote, leaving both buses at the same spot.

Verification showed the chassis number of one bus matched a State-registered vehicle, while the number plates were registered in Kerala. *—Salar news*

FOR 'SEXUAL ABUSE', 3 HELD

Govt Urdu School teacher paraded with slipper garland

HAVERI, 18 DEC

The Savanur police have arrested three suspects in a case in which a government Urdu school teacher, Jagadish Vaggannavar, was assaulted, garlanded with slippers and paraded on the streets for allegedly sexually harassing girl students.

The arrested suspects are Savanur residents Abdulgani Paras, Khalil Ahmed Khatib and Ahmed Khan Khanjade.

On 10 December, the suspects allegedly barged into the school, assaulted teacher Jagadish, beat him with slippers, and then humiliated him by placing a garland of slippers around his neck and parading him along the main roads of Savanur. A video of the parade went viral on social media.

After a complaint was filed by the victim, the Savanur police registered an FIR against 22 persons.

Of these, three have now been arrested, while attempts are underway to apprehend the remaining suspects.

The accused were identified from a video footage of the incident. After the case was registered, all suspects fled.

CPI S. Devanand and Head Constable Mallikarjun Odanavar have been suspended for failure to take action.

In his complaint, English teacher Jagadish alleged that the suspects had attacked him with an iron rod.

He said that between 11.30 am and 1 pm on 10 December, a group assaulted him accusing him of behaving indecently with girls, attempted to kill him, dragged him out of the school, beat him with slippers, and paraded him through the roads of Savanur with a slipper garland.

District Superintendent of Police Yashoda Vantagodi said that cases have been registered against 22 persons on the charges of assaulting the teacher and for sexual harassment against the teacher. *—Salar News*

- The Savanur police have arrested three suspects in a case in which a government Urdu school teacher, Jagadish Vaggannavar, was assaulted, garlanded with slippers and paraded on the streets for allegedly sexually harassing girl students.

MUDA case: Court raps Lokayukta over delay in submitting report

BENGALURU, 18 DEC

The Special Court for People's Representatives has expressed displeasure with the Lokayukta for failing to file the final probe report in the MUDA land site allotment case involving CM Siddaramaiah. Despite clear orders to submit the final "B report" by 18 December, the Lokayukta provided only an interim progress report.

During the proceedings, the judge questioned the delay, prompting Lokayukta officials to state they were awaiting prosecution sanction against certain officials before proceeding. The court also requested the Special Public Prosecutor to present the case diary, which he indicated could be placed before the court under seal if given additional time. This request faced strong opposition from the complainant, activist Snehamayi Krishna, who accused the authorities of attempting to mislead the court, asserting that no substantial investigation had been conducted and no witnesses examined as previously ordered.

In light of the absence of a final report, the court adjourned the matter and deferred its orders on petitions challenging the Lokayukta's B report and the clean chit granted to CM Siddaramaiah and three others until 23 December. The Lokayukta Police had previously cleared CM and others of wrongdoing in the case, citing lack of evidence. *—PTI*

Joyalukkas unveils 'Season of Gifting' year-end offer

Joyalukkas, the world's favourite jeweller with over six decades of legacy, has unveiled its nationwide festive campaign, 'The Season of Gifting', running across all showrooms in India from 12 December 2025 to 4 January 2026.

Timed for the peak festive and wedding season, the campaign underscores the brand's customer-first philosophy and leadership in India's jewellery retail market. Joyalukkas operates 190 showrooms across 12 countries worldwide. As part of the campaign, customers can enjoy two key offers designed to deliver exceptional value.

These include an additional Rs 250 per gram on old gold exchange, enabling customers to upgrade their jewellery, and a flat 25 per cent discount on the value of diamonds and uncut diamonds, offering significant savings on certified pieces.

Announcing the campaign, Dr Joy Alukkas, Chairman of the Joyalukkas Group, said the initiative reflects the brand's gratitude for the trust of customers. The campaign spans Joyalukkas's extensive Indian retail network, offering certified, responsibly sourced jewellery and personalised in-store guidance.

Customers can also access services such as jewellery customisation, after-sales support and bridal collections. ***Advertorial***

M'rashtra minister Kokate stripped of his portfolios

MUMBAI, 18 DEC

Maharashtra minister Manikrao Kokate has been stripped of his portfolios following his conviction in a 1995 cheating and forgery case, with Governor Acharya Devvrat reallocating his departments to Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar. Kokate, an NCP MLA from Sinnar in Nashik district, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment and fined Rs 50,000 by a Nashik court in a case linked to a state housing scheme. In a letter to CM Devendra Fadnavis, the governor approved the transfer of the Sports and Youth Welfare, Minority Development and Aukaf portfolios to Ajit Pawar, rendering Kokate a minister without charge. The Nashik district and sessions court upheld conviction on Tuesday and issued an arrest warrant after dismissing his appeal. *—PTI*

3 Naxalites killed in encounter in Chhattisgarh

SUKMA, 18 DEC

Three Naxalites, including a woman, were killed in an encounter with security personnel in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district on Thursday, police reported. The exchange of fire erupted in the morning on a forested hill in the Golapalli police station area as a team from the District Reserve Guard conducted a search operation based on intelligence about Maoist presence. Sukma Superintendent of Police Kiran Chavan stated, "The bodies of three Naxalites, including a woman, have been recovered from the encounter site so far." The operation is ongoing, and more details are awaited. This incident brings the total number of Naxalites killed in encounters in Chhattisgarh this year to 284, with 255 of those in the Bastar division. *—PTI*

WB slum set on fire to protect illegal voters: BJP

KOLKATA, 18 DEC

The BJP on Thursday alleged that the massive fire at the Ghuni slum in New Town near Kolkata was "sponsored" to protect illegal voters amid SIR, a charge rejected by the ruling TMC and the Congress. BJP leader Amit Malviya claimed that data from the list of six booths in Ghuni village raised questions about the blaze that broke out on Wednesday. "If there was ever any doubt that the massive fire in the Ghuni slum near Eco Park, New Town was sponsored, one only needs to look at the ASD list of the six booths under Ghuni village," Malviya said on Thursday, asserting that around 850 individuals featured on the list, of whom nearly 650 were Muslims, and that about 450 Muslims were marked "untraceable." *—PTI*

Kuki outfit warns transgender cyclist over expedition

IMPHAL, 18 DEC

Transgender activist Malem Thongam, from the Meitei community, has cycled over 2,300km from Delhi to promote peace in Manipur. Her 'Cycling for Manipur Peace' expedition reached the Naga-majority Senapati district on Wednesday and is due to pass through Kuki-dominated Kangpokpi on Friday before concluding in Imphal. The Committee on Tribal Unity (COTU) warned that her visit to Kangpokpi could provoke tensions, urging authorities to halt the expedition and stating they would not be responsible for any incidents. Security along NH 2 in Kangpokpi has been tightened. Since May 2023, ethnic clashes between Kukis and Meiteis have killed over 260 people and displaced thousands, leaving the state deeply divided. *—PTI*

G RAM G Bill: Oppn holds protest rally in Parliament

Kharge says there will be a nationwide protest against the Bill

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Several opposition MPs on Thursday took out a protest march inside the Parliament House complex against the G RAM G bill with Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge asserting that there will be a nationwide movement against this "systematic murder of the world's largest employment scheme".

Behind a huge banner of 'Mahatma Gandhi NREGA', they marched from the Gandhi statue at Prerna Sthal to Makar Dwar, raising slogans against the government.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, AICC general secretary KC Venugopal, DMK's K Kanhimozhi, TR Ballu, A Raja, IUML's ET Mohammed Basheer, Shiv Sena (UBT)'s Arvind Sawant and RSP's NK Premchandran, among others, participated in the protest.

"The Modi government has not only insulted the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, but has also crushed the right to work, which was instrumental in bringing about socio-economic transformation in India's villages," Kharge said in a post on X in Hindi after the protest.

"Against this tyranny of the ruling dictatorial government, we will fight from Parliament to the streets," Kharge said.

In another post, Kharge said, "This is not merely a case of renaming MGNREGA; rather, it is the systematic murder of the world's largest employment scheme."

Speaking with reporters, Kharge said they are taking away the right to work from people and asserted that "there will be a nationwide movement against it".

Senior Congress leader Sonia Gandhi joined the protesting MPs and participated in the demonstrations at Makar Dwar. Speaking to reporters, Venugopal said, "Today, Parliament is witnessing the murder of democracy. By removing the name of Mahatma Gandhi from NREGA they are trying to kill the democratic values as well as the ideology of the Father of the Nation."

The Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Bill to replace the UPA-era MGNREGA is being debated in Parliament. *—PTI*

Congress MP Sonia Gandhi, Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge, DMK MP TR Baalu and other opposition members raise slogans during a protest at the Parliament House complex amid its ongoing Winter session, in New Delhi, on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

> **After we raised our objections, he (Palaniswami) merely asked for a name change to be dropped, pretending to exert pressure in his own 'style,' while spreading the false notion that MGNREGA's workdays would increase to 125**
>
> -MK Stalin, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister

Panel seeks priority for critical mineral projects

A Parliamentary Panel has flagged delays between mine auctions and operationalisation and has urged the government to explore setting up an inter-ministerial committee to monitor the post-auction progress of mineral projects. The panel also stressed that critical mineral projects should be given priority while granting clearances. The observations were made by the Standing Committee on Coal, Mines and Steel. *—PTI*

Panel examining Bills to remove PM & CMs

A Parliamentary committee investigating Bills aimed at removing Prime Ministers and Chief Ministers was granted an extension on 18 December 2025 to submit its report by the last week of the Budget Session next year. Joint Parliamentary Committee Chair, Aparajita Sarangi, sought time until "the first day of the last week of the Budget Session, 2026," which was approved via voice vote. *—PTI*

Securities Market Code Bill tabled in Lok Sabha

Finance Minister **Nirmala Sitharaman** introduced the Securities Market Code Bill in the Lok Sabha on 18 December, proposing that it be sent to a departmental standing committee for review. Opposition's Arun Nehru (DMK) and Manish Tewari (Congress), opposed it, saying it grants excessive powers to single body. *—PTI*

Chadha seeks amendment to Copyright Act

AAP MP Raghav Chadha urged Rajya Sabha to amend the Copyright Act 1957 to protect digital content creators, arguing their livelihoods should not be governed by "arbitrary algorithms." He called for a clear definition of digital fair use, proportional copyright enforcement, and mandatory due process before content removal. He said that millions of creators earn from online platforms and that fair use must not be treated. *—PTI*

AFTER NITISH PULLS HIJAB

Was unaware of doctor's refusal to join duty: Minister

PATNA/LUCKNOW, 18 DEC

Bihar Health Minister **Mangal Pandey** on Thursday said he was not aware of reports that a female doctor had refused to join duty following an incident in which Chief Minister Nitish Kumar was seen publicly removing the veil from her face.

The senior BJP leader, however, sought to put a lid on the controversy by asserting that NDA in the state has always worked for empowerment of women (Matri Shakti).

"I have no such information", was the terse reply of Pandey, whom journalists asked about reports that the Ayush doctor Nusrat Parveen, who hails from Kolkata, has declined the government job following the unsavoury incident that took place earlier this week.

COMPLAINT AGAINST UP MINISTER

As outrage snowballed with the opposition and others asking for an apology from Uttar Pradesh minister Sanjay Nishad over his remarks on Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar pulling down a hijab from a woman's face, attempting to defuse the controversy, the Nishad Party Chief on Wednesday said the comment, made in Hindi and labelled misogynistic and crude, was light-hearted and made casually, even as a Samajwadi Party office-bearer filed a complaint with the Lucknow police against UP minister and Bihar CM. *—PTI*

TVK is pure force, but DMK is evil: Vijay

ERODE, 18 DEC

Actor-politician **Vijay** on Thursday launched a scathing attack on Tamil Nadu's ruling DMK, calling it an "evil force," echoing terms used by late AIADMK leaders MG Ramachandran and J Jayalalithaa. At a public meeting near Vijayamangalam Toll Plaza in Perundurai, he described his Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) as a "pure force" and indicated the 2026 Assembly contest is now between the two parties.

"This contest is between the thooya sakthi TVK and theeya sakthi DMK," he said, adding, "I repeat what MGR and Jayalalithaa said: the DMK is an evil force."

Vijay defended his use of film dialogues, referencing law and order, women's safety, and unfulfilled poll promises. He criticised DMK and the BJP for neglecting state welfare, saying, "Our political enemy is DMK, ideological enemy is BJP." He highlighted failures on promises like scrapping NEET, waiving student loans, and Rs 100 LPG subsidies, and accused vested interests of running a smear campaign against him.

The Chief emphasised his opposition to freebies while supporting subsidies, citing turmeric growers' plight and inadequate irrigation. Drawing inspiration from Periyar, Annadurai, and MGR, he underscored TVK's ideological roots. *—PTI*

India resumes visa centre ops in Dhaka post protest

DHAKA, 18 DEC

India resumed operations at its visa application centre in Dhaka, a day after closing it over security concerns, but closed two other identical facilities in other parts of Bangladesh as anti-India protestors tried to march towards the Indian missions there.

The Indian Visa Application Centre (IVAC) in Khulna and Rajshahi were closed due to security concerns amid protest marches.

In Rajshahi, the 'Bharityo Adhipotto Birodhi July 36 Mancha' tried to march towards the Assistant High Commission of India, but the police blocked them. The protesters raised anti-India slogans, according to videos on social media.

In Khulna, the protestors under the banner 'Unity Against Indian Hegemony' tried to march towards the Assistant High Commission of India, but army and navy personnel joined hands with the police to stop the marchers.

The reports said in both the rallies the protestors accused India of sheltering deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and demanded her immediate handover for execution. *— PTI*

The Indian Visa Application Centre (IVAC) in Khulna and Rajshahi were closed due to security concerns amid protest marches **PHOTO: PTI**

- The reports said in both the rallies the protestors accused India of sheltering deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and demanded her immediate handover for execution.

Nadda meets Afghan Health Minister, reaffirms support

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

India has reaffirmed its continued commitment to supporting Afghanistan's health sector and humanitarian needs during a meeting between Union Health Minister JP Nadda and Afghanistan's Minister of Public Health, Mawlawi Noor Jalal Jalali.

During the meeting held on Wednesday, both sides reviewed the ongoing health cooperation and discussed avenues to further strengthen collaboration in healthcare infrastructure, medical supplies and capacity building, the Indian health ministry said.

Nadda underlined that guided by India's long-standing people-centric approach, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has always emphasised that India's engagement with Afghanistan should remain focused on welfare, capacity building and access to critical healthcare services.

He added that India's assistance to Afghanistan remains guided by humanitarian considerations and the long-standing bonds between the people of the two countries.

Additional proposals for health sector support are currently under active consideration, the health ministry said.

The meeting also discussed capacity-building initiatives. India is working on modalities to send a team of senior doctors to Afghanistan to organise a medical camp and provide training to Afghan doctors, the ministry stated. *—PTI*

CREATOR OF STATUE OF UNITY

'Statue man' Ram Sutar dies

NOIDA/MUMBAI, 18 DEC

Renowned sculptor Ram Sutar, whose creations included the gigantic Statue of Unity at Kevadia and the iconic Mahatma Gandhi statue at the Parliament complex, died on Wednesday night at his Noida residence. He was 100 and was suffering from age-related illnesses, said his son Anil Sutar.

Among those who mourned him, was Prime Minister Modi who said his works were "powerful expression of India's history and culture."

Known as the "statue man", Sutar was active till the end and was involved in projects like the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Memorial at Indu Mill in Mumbai and the soon-to-be-unveiled statue of Gopinath Bardoloi in Guwahati.

Born in a humble family at Gondur village in Dhule district of Maharashtra on 19 February 1925, Sutar was a gold medallist from Mumbai's JJ School of Art and Architecture. He was honoured with the Padma Shri in 1999 and Padma Bhushan in 2016. Recently, Sutar was conferred the Maharashtra Bhushan Puraskar, the state's highest award.

President Droupadi Murmu said Sutar's contributions enriched India's artistic and cultural heritage.

Ram Vanji Sutar, whose creations defined the country's public art landscape, was instrumental in giving Indian memorial sculpture global recognition.

In a career spanning over seven decades, he created some of the country's iconic statues and memorials, blending artistic realism with historical depth, and commanded immense respect in India and abroad for his mastery over bronze and stone. *—PTI*

Ram Sutar working on Statue of Unity **PHOTO: Ramsutar.in**

- Known as the "statue man", Sutar was active till the end and was involved in projects like the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Memorial at Indu Mill in Mumbai and the soon-to-be-unveiled statue of Gopinath Bardoloi in Guwahati.

AAP sweeps Punjab rural polls, wins 200+ zilas

CHANDIGARH, 18 DEC

The ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) emerged ahead in Punjab's zila parishad and panchayat samiti elections, with results so far showing a clear lead in most zones. Polling was held on 14 December to elect members for 347 zones of 22 zila parishads and 2,838 zones of 153 Panchayat Samitis.

Out of 317 declared zila parishad zones, AAP won 201, followed by Congress (60), Shiromani Akali Dal (39), BJP (4), BSP (3) and Independents (10).

In key districts, AAP won 22 zones in Hoshiarpur, 19 each in Amritsar and Patiala, and 17 each in Tarn Taran and Gurdaspur.

AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal, accompanied by Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, said nearly 70 per cent of seats were secured by his party, showing rural voters' approval of the State government's work.

He rejected opposition claims of high-handedness, noting many margins of victory were under 100 votes, proving the elections were free and fair.

Punjab Congress chief Amrinder Singh Raja Warring accused AAP of "stealing" polls, while the ruling party maintained a strong lead across both zila parishads and panchayat samitis.

Complete results are yet to be declared. *—PTI*

Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann with Arvind Kejriwal **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**

Truck runs over schoolgirl amid dense fog in UP

KAUSHAMBI, 18 DEC

A tragic incident occurred on Thursday when a 15-year-old girl, Sarita Devi, was killed by a speeding dumper truck while walking to school in dense fog. The accident happened near Bairagipur crossing around 9am. Mahewa Ghat SHO Dhirendra Singh confirmed that visibility was poor due to the fog, which contributed to the accident. The dumper driver fled the scene, abandoning the vehicle. The deceased was a Class 10 student and a resident of Mahewa Uparhar village. Police have since seized the dumper involved and the body has been sent for a post-mortem examination. *—PTI*

PHOTO: FREEPIK

Mastermind of fake medicines racket arrested in Delhi

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Delhi Police on Thursday said that they arrested Pramod Kumar Gupta, 67, the alleged mastermind behind a counterfeit medicines manufacturing racket, from the Hazrat Nizamuddin area. Gupta's arrest follows the recent bust of a factory producing fake medications, with two accomplices taken into custody earlier. DCP Aditya Gautam stated that further probe traced the supply chain to a unit illegally producing 'Betnovate' for distribution across North India. Authorities recovered large quantities of raw materials capable of creating over 50,000 fake units of Betnovate, along with counterfeit cosmetic products including 700 tubes of Fair and Lovely cream. *—PTI*

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Mall mgmt booked after actress Nidhhi Agerwal mobbed

HYDERABAD, 18 DEC

A case has been registered against the management of a mall and event organisers after actress Nidhhi Agerwal was reportedly mobbed following a song launch for the upcoming Prabhas-starrer 'The Raja Saab'. Police stated that the case was filed for holding the event without prior permission. A large crowd had gathered on Wednesday night, which turned chaotic as fans overwhelmed the actress while she was leaving. Videos of her distress circulated on social media. Security personnel were later deployed to escort her. A police official from the KPHB station confirmed, "the event was organised without obtaining permission." *—PTI*

AI Express flight diverted to Kochi over tyre issue

KOCHI, 18 DEC

An Air India Express flight from Jeddah to Kozhikode, carrying 160 passengers, made a precautionary landing at Cochin International Airport on Thursday due to suspected tyre damage. The airline said the issue was likely caused by a foreign object on the Jeddah runway. The aircraft landed safely at 9.07am, with emergency services fully activated. Post-landing inspection confirmed that both right-side tyres had burst, though there were no issues with the landing gear. No passengers or crew were injured. Air India Express clarified that it was a precautionary, not an emergency, landing, citing Kozhikode's table top airport as a factor. Passengers are being transported to Kozhikode by road, and the runway at Cochin was cleared and reopened. The airline emphasised that safety of everyone remains as its top priority. *—PTI*

As Delhi gasps, 'no PUC, no fuel' kicks in

Quieter fuel stations, manual checks mark rollout; 76% surge in PUC issuance on Day 1

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Delhi witnessed an intensified checks at border points and petrol pumps on Thursday as the 'No PUC, No Fuel' rule and a ban on non-Delhi private vehicles below BS-VI norms came into force to curb worsening air pollution.

Enforcement teams from the traffic police and transport department were deployed at entry points, toll plazas and fuel stations, leading to fewer vehicles on the roads and a visible dip in fuel sales.

Motorists without valid pollution-under-control (PUC) certificates were denied fuel, while several vehicles were turned back at borders.

Officials said smart plate-reader devices, manual checks and voice alerts were being used, though physical verification remained necessary at many locations.

Fines of around Rs 10,000 were imposed on violators during the morning checks.

Delhi Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa said joint teams had been deployed to ensure compliance and urged people to obtain valid PUC certificates. Data showed a nearly 76 per cent surge in PUC issuances on 17 December, a day before the rule took effect.

With fewer vehicles rolling in and enforcement teams stationed at entrances, petrol pumps across Delhi on Thursday wore a quieter look as the 'No PUC, No Fuel' rule came into force **PHOTO: PTI**

> **'No PUC, No Fuel' rule may cause inconvenience, but necessary to test vehicles**
>
> - Rekha Gupta, Delhi Chief Minister

The restrictions exempt CNG and electric vehicles, public transport and essential services, while vehicles carrying construction material remain barred under GRAP-IV norms.

Meanwhile, dense fog reduced visibility to as low as 100 metres in parts of Delhi-National Capital Region, disrupting traffic. Air quality remained 'very poor', with the Air Quality Index recorded at 358, officials said. *—PTI*

NOW, DEHRADUN AIR QUALITY SLIPS INTO 'POOR' CATEGORY

Air quality in Dehradun has worsened over the past two days, slipping into the 'poor' category and triggering concern among experts. Vijay Sridhar, head of the pollution monitoring centre at Doon University, said the city's real-time Air Quality Index stood at 267 on Wednesday, while the average touched 291. "The AQI improves during the day due to air movement, but crosses 300 at night," he told PTI Videos, adding that conditions were not comparable to Delhi but remained unsatisfactory. Residents were confused as several LED boards displayed outdated air quality data. Experts attributed the rise to increased vehicular traffic, garbage burning, warning of health risks, especially for children and elderly. *—PTI*

27 FLIGHTS CANCELLED AMID FOG

As many as 27 flights were cancelled at Delhi airport on Thursday due to dense fog and low visibility, Delhi International Airport Ltd said. Sixteen departures and 11 arrivals were affected, while several other flights were delayed. In a passenger advisory, DIAL said operations were under CAT-III conditions, which may lead to disruptions. CAT-III landings require specially trained pilots and compliant aircraft, allowing operations when runway visual range drops to 50–200 metres during severe fog conditions. *—PTI*

LIKENS IT TO 'SIXES' IN LAST OVER

SC raps judges over flurry of orders before retirement

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Supreme Court on Wednesday flagged a "growing trend" of judges issuing a flurry of orders just before retirement, likening it to a batter "hitting sixes" in the final over, while hearing a plea by a Madhya Pradesh judicial officer suspended days before superannuation.

A bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant, with Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M Pancholi, was examining a challenge by a principal and district judge against a full court decision of the Madhya Pradesh High Court suspending him 10 days before his scheduled retirement, allegedly over questionable orders.

"Petitioner just before retirement started hitting sixes. It is an unfortunate trend. I do not want to elaborate on it," the bench observed. The Chief Justice added, "There is a growing trend of judges passing so many orders just before retirement."

The officer, earlier due to retire on 30 November, was suspended on 19 November over two judicial orders.

Senior advocate Vipin Sanghi said the officer had an impeccable service record with consistently high annual confidential report ratings, and argued that disciplinary action cannot be initiated merely for passing judicial orders appealable before higher courts.

Agreeing in principle, the bench said judicial officers cannot ordinarily face disciplinary proceedings for erroneous orders. "He cannot be suspended for this. But what if the orders are palpably dishonest?" the Chief Justice asked, drawing a line between error and misconduct.

Declining relief, the bench told the officer to seek recall before the high court, directing it to decide representation within four weeks. *—PTI*

We'll ask you what is humanity: SC in stray dogs case

Responding to objections over "inhuman" treatment of strays under civic body of Delhi rules, the Supreme Court on Thursday told a petitioner that it would play a video at the hearing and "ask you what is humanity". Senior advocate Kapil Sibal told a bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta that a three-judge bench scheduled for Thursday was cancelled and the matter listed on 7 January. He said MCD rules framed meanwhile were "completely contrary" and urged an earlier hearing, citing lack of shelters.
Justice Mehta said, "We will play a video for your benefit and ask you what is humanity." - PTI

Kolhapur woman is IMA's 1st Territorial Army officer

PUNE, 18 DEC

Saee Jadhav from Kolhapur in Maharashtra has created history by becoming the first woman Territorial Army officer to complete pre-commissioning training at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), Dehradun, ending the institution's 93-year tradition of training only male officer cadets.

The 23-year-old was commissioned as a Lieutenant during the Passing Out Parade of the IMA's 157th course and formally inducted into the Army on 13 December. Established in 1932, the IMA has produced generations of officers, making Jadhav's achievement a significant milestone.

She has been commissioned into the 130 Infantry Battalion (Territorial Army), an ecological unit of the Kumaon Regiment, based in Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand. Jadhav is currently pursuing an MBA through distance learning while preparing for competitive examinations.

Her father, Major Sandip Jadhav of the Territorial Army, said there was only one vacancy for a woman officer, and Saee secured the top rank on merit. Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis congratulated her, calling the achievement an inspiration for young girls nationwide and a proud moment for the state. *—PTI*

Saee Jadhav being honoured **PHOTO: X/ DEVENDRA FADNAVIS**

Sabarimala row: SIT quizzes NRI businessman

T'PURAM, 18 DEC

The Special Investigation Team (SIT) conducting the inquiry into the Sabarimala gold loss has recorded a statement from a Dubai-based NRI businessman, officials reported on Thursday. The businessman's testimony came after Congress leader Ramesh Chennithala suggested that he possessed information relating to an international antique racket's involvement in the incident. The SIT followed up on this lead, and the businessman provided hearsay along with contact numbers for others who may offer insights into the antique business. Ongoing investigations have already led to two registered cases concerning the missing gold from the Sreekovil's gold-clad plates. The primary suspect, Unnikrishnan Potty, is alleged to have removed the gold plates during 2019 electroplating. *— PTI*

Hoax bomb alerts disrupt Mumbai, Nagpur courts

MUMBAI, 18 DEC

Several courts in south Mumbai, including the Bombay High Court, sessions court, Mazgaon and Esplanade courts, two magistrate courts in Bandra and Andheri, and two prominent banks received bomb threat emails on Thursday, which later proved to be hoaxes, officials said.

"The premises were immediately vacated, and the Bomb Detection and Disposal Squad (BDDS) conducted thorough searches, but nothing suspicious was found," a senior police official said.

The Bombay High Court bar associations stated that staff were evacuated due to security concerns. Nitin Thakker, president of the Bombay Bar Association, said court proceedings were disrupted for about an hour, with hearings resuming at 3 pm.

In Andheri, advocate Ali Kaashif Khan said the magistrate adjourned all matters, and vehicles were cleared as the bomb squad checked the premises.

The Bandra magistrate court and two banks also received threat emails, prompting police and security personnel to search the buildings, with no explosives found.

In Nagpur, the District and Sessions Court received an email claiming two RDX-based bombs. Security was heightened, and BDDS personnel inspected the premises, but no suspicious items were discovered, police said. *—PTI*

Co-accused in actress assault case booked for defamation

THRISSUR, 18 DEC

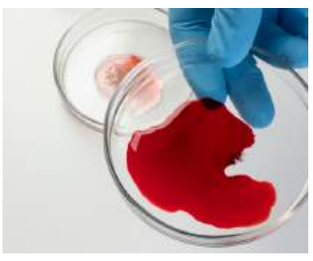
Thrissur Cyber Police have registered a case against Martin Antony, the second accused in the 2017 actress assault case, for allegedly defaming the survivor on social media. Police said a video circulated online after the trial court delivered its verdict, in which Antony is accused of revealing the survivor's identity and making defamatory remarks. Investigators suspect the video was recorded before the verdict and shared later. Following a complaint to the Thrissur Range Deputy Inspector General of Police, authorities traced 21 social media accounts involved in circulating the video. Those responsible will be identified and charged, police said. In the original case, six accused, including Antony, were sentenced to 20 years' rigorous imprisonment, while actor Dileep and three others were acquitted. *—PTI*

Blood transfusion error under probe

JAIPUR, 18 DEC

A 75-year-old woman, Bhawani Devi, at the Acharya Tulsi cancer wing of PBM Hospital in Bikaner, Rajasthan, was allegedly given the wrong blood group during a transfusion, causing her condition to deteriorate, hospital sources said.

The patient, admitted with severe anaemia, received a first unit of A-positive blood without issue on Wednesday evening. However, a second unit of B-positive blood was reportedly supplied by the blood bank and transfused without proper cross-checking by nursing staff.



The error was discovered when a relative noticed the blood group on the unit and alerted staff. The transfusion was stopped immediately, and emergency treatment stabilised the patient.

The incident was reported to Dr Surendra Verma, principal of Sardar Patel Medical College, who visited the cancer wing with the department head.

"The patient is absolutely stable. Some issue arose during the transfusion process," Verma said, adding that a committee would investigate the lapse. "Strict action will be taken against anyone found guilty." *—PTI*

MED TEST CONFIRMS CLAIM

Maharashtra farmer forced to sell kidney to clear loan

CHANDRAPUR, 18 DEC

A farmer from Maharashtra's Chandrapur district who claimed he was forced to sell his kidney to repay loans has only one kidney, police said, citing medical examinations.

Roshan Kude underwent tests at Chandrapur Medical College and Hospital, where doctors confirmed one kidney was missing, an official said. The finding followed Kude's allegation that mounting debts to moneylenders compelled him to sell a kidney, triggering a police probe and arrests.

Police have arrested six moneylenders, five of whom remain in custody till December 20. Kude, 29, a resident of Minthur village in Nagbhid tehsil, owns four acres of farmland. After crop losses, he said he started a dairy business by buying cows and in 2021 borrowed Rs 50,000 from two lenders at 40 per cent interest. He later told police the lenders claimed the amount had ballooned to Rs 74 lakh.

Farmer Roshan Kude from M'rashtra **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**

According to Kude, one lender suggested he sell a kidney to partially clear the debt. He said he contacted an agent online, who took him to Kolkata for medical tests before sending him to Cambodia, where the kidney was removed. Kude claimed he received Rs 8 lakh for the procedure.

The accused have been identified as Kishor Bawankule, Pradip Bawankule, Sanjay Ballarpure, Laxman Urkude, Manish Ghatbandhe and Satyavan Borkar. The case has been filed at Brahmapuri police station. *—PTI*

Yamuna Expressway crash toll mounts to 19

MATHURA, 18 DEC

Death toll in the multi-vehicle pile-up on the Yamuna Expressway in Mathura rose to 19 on Thursday, officials said, as authorities continued identification of victims using DNA profiling.

District Magistrate Chandra Prakash Singh said four of the deceased have been identified, while DNA samples of the remaining bodies have been collected and sent for matching. "Nineteen people have lost their lives. Identification of four victims has been completed," he said.

Around 90 people were injured, most of whom have returned home after treatment. "Only six injured persons are currently admitted in hospitals," Singh added.

The accident occurred on Tuesday when eight buses and two smaller vehicles collided on the expressway, triggering a massive fire. Several bodies were charred beyond recognition, officials said.

DNA samples of 12 persons whose relatives remain missing have also been collected and have been sent to the Forensic Science Laboratory.

Identification will be confirmed after matching with samples provided by claimants. A magisterial probe has been ordered separately in this regard. *—PTI*

CRIMSON COAST

Rain on Iran's Hormuz Island briefly turned its famous Red Beach deep crimson this week, as iron-rich soil washed into the sea. The rare sight is a major tourist attraction. The red soil — locally known as gelak — is exported in limited quantities and used to produce cosmetics, pigments and traditional products. ***PHOTO: SCREENGRAB***

Kerala organ trafficking has Tajikistan & Iran link

A racket involved in trafficking people to Iran for illegal organ donation had also sent two persons from Odisha to Tajikistan this year, the NIA has found while probing a case registered in Kerala.

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) revealed fresh details in an affidavit filed in a court here while seeking further custody of the first accused, Madhu Jayakumar, a native of Palarivattom here.

The case came to light on 18 May, 2024, when a person named Sabith was intercepted by immigration officials at Kochi airport on suspicion of being part of an organised organ trafficking network.

Subsequent investigation led to the arrest of Sajith and Bellamkonda Ram Prasad, a native of Vijayawada, who were found to have facilitated the travel of organ donors and recipients to hospitals in Iran for illegal organ transplantation.

Jayakumar, who had been absconding for over a year, was arrested upon his arrival at the New Delhi airport on 7 November this year.

As per the affidavit filed by the national agency at the NIA court here, Jayakumar, during interrogation, disclosed the names of 27 recipients who underwent kidney transplantation in Iran with his assistance. He also revealed the names of 11 donors, the NIA said.

"Even after the registration of this case, in 2025, two persons from Odisha were brought to Tajikistan, where their kidneys were transplanted to rich recipients through the accused," the affidavit said. The NIA sought Jayakumar's further custody to trace the money obtained through the illegal organ trade.

"The huge amount obtained by him through the kidney trade through Stemma Club and various bank accounts was converted into Bitcoin and USDT. The details of these Bitcoin and USDT transactions made by the first accused are to be ascertained through custodial interrogation," the agency told the court.

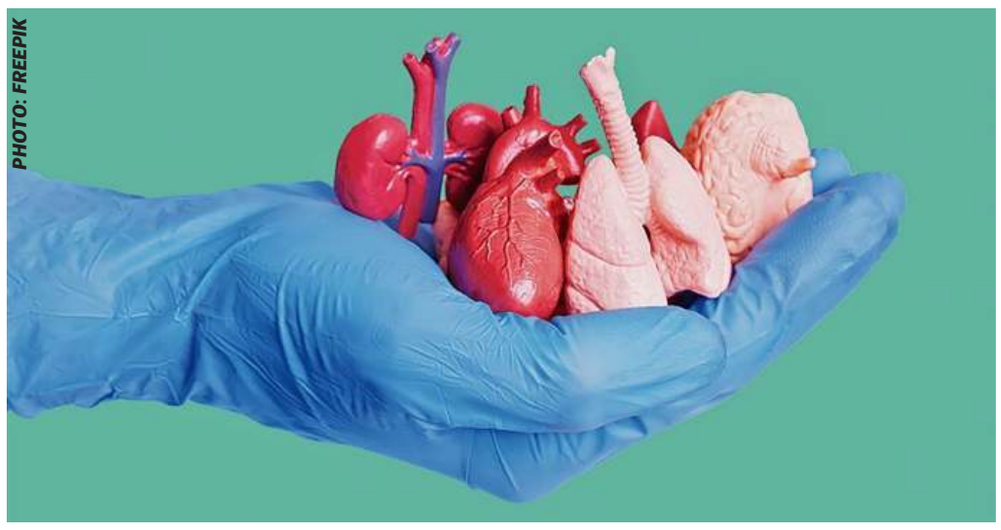


PHOTO: FREEPIK

● "Even after the registration of this case, in 2025, two persons from Odisha were brought to Tajikistan, where their kidneys were transplanted to rich recipients through the accused," NIA reports.

Stemma Club, a health club founded by Jayakumar, was allegedly used as a cover for illegal activities.

The NIA also said Jayakumar needs to be confronted with bank account statements, images, and videos extracted from the mobile phones of the other accused during social media analysis.

"The connection of the first accused with other kidney racketeers is also to be gathered through custodial interrogation," the agency said.

Though Jayakumar's counsel opposed the plea, pointing out that the NIA had already interrogated him for seven days in custody, the court observed that the gravity of the alleged crime was extremely serious.

The NIA court said that detailed and thorough questioning was required to uncover all aspects of the case in light of the disclosures of the accused. The court granted the NIA custody of him for three days on 15 December. Jayakumar is currently in NIA custody, which is set to end at 11 am on Thursday.

Sources told PTI that attempts are being made to trace two donors from Odisha who were sent to Tajikistan.

"Even before the arrest of Jayakumar, NIA could track several donors and recipients who are from various parts of the country. The additional donors and recipients revealed by Jayakumar are being traced. Their statement would be recorded as a witness in the case," sources said.

NIA chargesheet in the case stated that donors who are from a financially poor background were lured with high remuneration. However, after taking them to Iran, their passports were seized, and the money they offered was not given. *—PTI*

SALAR ساہر

AI could hurt and help local journalism

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly being used by local news producers to assist journalists. Much like the rise of digital platforms, it can be both a friend and foe to local news outlets and our social and political systems.

It is widely acknowledged that public interest journalism is an essential part of a thriving democracy. When done well, it holds public institutions and powerful individuals accountable, keeping the population informed and providing a platform for public debate.

Local news struggles

Despite its importance, many areas of the local news sector globally are confronting declining advertising revenue and audience fragmentation caused by massive disruptions after the rise of Big Tech.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to more cuts, closures and consolidation. Amid this, concerns have grown about 'news deserts' — towns or cities with little to no access to locally relevant news.

These trends are concerning for the proper functioning of democracy as studies have found links between local news decline and increases in government inefficiency, corruption and political polarisation.

The rise of AI might appear to be another nail in the coffin for local news producers, as platforms such as Google's Gemini AI Overviews and ChatGPT allow people to bypass news websites (and social media) to receive information summaries. Although generative AI tools can be unreliable, they are becoming more accurate and credible every day.

A copyright battle looms with media businesses suing AI companies over the use of news content. While some publishers are pushing for deals to monetise content, local news producers face greater difficulty due to their smaller size, lack of collective bargaining power and limited legal resources.

Local AI opportunities

Paradoxically, AI might also help ease the very burdens digital technologies such as itself have – in part – created. It can do this by providing new efficiencies and tools to help fill information gaps and support journalism.

Research also shows physical presence and news relevance are vital to the credibility and trust of local journalism. Although AI cannot replace human presence and the connections local journalists build through in-person relationships, it can potentially support efforts to help synthesise information from local government, local courts, public institutions and other authorities, thus improving an outlet's local news focus. In 2023, News Corp Australia revealed it was producing 3,000 articles a week using generative AI, overseen by a unit named Data Local.

This year, The Guardian reported that journalists at News Corp had voiced concerns over plans by the company to broaden its use of AI for news production, including one tool that would be used to produce and edit stories, effectively performing the role of a sub-editor.

National and international research suggests the use of AI is growing in newsrooms. A 2024 study involving a survey of 1,004 UK journalists found 56 per cent reported using AI professionally at least once a week, mainly for speed and efficiency.

Few UK journalists used it for audio or video generation, however. There is, nonetheless, a gap in research about how local journalists are using AI. A 2025 study used an AI-generated text detection tool to determine nine per cent of 186,000 articles from 1,500 US newspapers were either partially or fully AI-generated and noted that AI use was rarely disclosed.

All experiments stress the importance of AI supporting, rather than replacing humans. Human oversight is not only needed to ensure accuracy but as has been argued, journalists play a crucial role when reporting on people at their "worst moments", or to overturn inappropriate court reporting restrictions.

The challenges local news organisations face against AI innovation mirrors their limited bargaining power with Big Tech – they often lack the money, resources, technical capacity and leverage to experiment on their own. This is why our research suggests that cross-sector, industry-wide collaborations make sense for AI development and experimentation in the local news sector.

International examples demonstrate that when done well, cooperation to tackle common challenges can benefit all those involved, including the audiences. *—360info*

A 2025 study found nine per cent of 186,000 articles from US newspapers were either partially or fully AI-generated and noted that AI use was rarely disclosed ***PHOTO: AI***

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Is Netflix using Warner Bros to copy or kill traditional TV ?

The recent news that Netflix has agreed to buy part of Warner Bros Discovery (WBD) for USD 83 billion (£61.8 billion), followed by Paramount Global's hostile counterbid to acquire WBD in its entirety for USD 108.4 billion (£81 billion), has triggered shockwaves through Hollywood and the wider entertainment industry.

Initial responses – and passionate outcries – have largely centred on fears over job cuts, subscription fee rises, anti-trust concerns regarding the increased market share either bid would create, and the potential negative impact that Netflix's acquisition might have on the future of the film industry.

While these issues are no doubt important, one aspect of the Netflix deal has been relatively overlooked: the streamer's decision to cut out Discovery's portfolio of cable channels from its agreed acquisition of WBD. But this element of the deal is significant for what it reveals about the state of the television industry.

Netflix's decision to excise Discovery's cable channels from the agreement indicates its desire to avoid ownership of the legacy TV infrastructure of broadcast, cable and satellite television. It also reflects the broader trend of linear TV businesses becoming less attractive to media corporations as audiences continue to migrate online. At first glance, Netflix's exclusion of Discovery seems to confirm what we've been told for over a decade: streaming is killing traditional TV.

Since launching 'House of Cards' in 2013, Netflix has cultivated an image as television's great disruptor, a tech company that rendered the old broadcast model obsolete. What's more, this is a reputation that journalistic and scholarly debate has often burnished.

But as we argue in our new book, 'Television Goes Back to the Future: Rethinking TV's Streaming Revolution', this narrative of revolution is overstated and oversold. Beneath the rhetoric, streamers have persistently adopted, adapted, and often directly copied the conventions of legacy television.

The Netflix-WBD deal is no exception to this trend. Netflix's own announcement celebrates combining its "innovation" with Warner Bros' "century-long legacy of world-class storytelling". Yet in potentially acquiring HBO, Netflix is set to buy the very cable TV innovator it originally modelled its prestige drama strategy on.

This deal, then, represents less of a break from television history than prevailing narratives suggest.

PHOTO: NETFLIX

Back to the evergreen future

This is evident in the rationale underpinning Netflix's aims to acquire WBD's vast back catalogue of film and television. For decades, channels like TBS, TNT, and in the UK, Gold and Dave, have built their business models on syndicated repeats of evergreen programming, such as studio sitcoms and police procedurals.

Streaming platforms have adopted the same approach. For example, both 'Suits' and 'Lost' recently became streaming hits years after their original linear TV runs ended.

When Netflix UK recently announced 'Friends' would be leaving the platform at the end of the year, subscribers responded with uproar, revealing just how much "reruns" matter to streaming audiences. The Warner catalogue – which includes 'Friends' – offers Netflix a ready-made library to meet this demand.

Amazon's USD 8.5 billion purchase of MGM in 2022 reflected a similar calculation, with the studio's library alone valued at USD 3.4 billion. What this tells us is that the film and TV back catalogue, long the foundation of cable television, has become equally foundational to streaming.

Should the Netflix-WBD deal succeed, it would represent another step in what industry observers call "the great rebundling". Under the American cable model that solidified in the 1980s, viewers pay a monthly fee for a large package of channels rather than selecting them individually. Streaming initially fragmented this model, leaving viewers to juggle competing subscriptions (and frequently cancel them). In response, platforms have begun consolidating content and brands in ways that echo the cable bundle model.

This pattern is already evident in Disney's ongoing integration of Hulu within the Disney+ app, offering US consumers both services as part of a bundle deal.

Industry commentators predict Netflix will take a similar approach with HBO.

Media analyst Rua Aguete foresees that Netflix will eventually operate as "a global gateway" for viewers, with HBO sitting as a "premium content brand within that ecosystem".

But Netflix's embrace of traditional television practices is not new, nor limited to bundling and the reliance on much-loved TV classics. The platform spent years positioning itself against appointment viewing: watch what you want, when you want.

Yet as we show in 'Television Goes Back to the Future', the platform has increasingly embraced live events that create shared, simultaneous experiences in the long tradition of broadcast TV: WWE wrestling, NFL matches.

Netflix's introduction of an ad-supported tier in 2022 marked a further retreat from its original promise of uninterrupted viewing – a direct adoption of commercial television's long-established funding model.

Similar continuities are evident in how Netflix operates across borders. Streaming was supposed to make borders irrelevant: one global library, available everywhere. Instead, as media scholar Ramon Lobato argues, Netflix can be seen as "a series of national services linked through a common platform architecture".

The company establishes local production offices, hires regional executives, and commissions programming calibrated to national audiences, resulting in culturally specific originals such as the UK's Adolescence, Spain's Money Heist, and South Korea's Squid Game. Through such practices, Netflix, in some ways, mimics the practices and infrastructures of national broadcasting systems.

Should Netflix's deal with WBD go through, it would represent not a departure from Netflix's recent trajectory, but its logical culmination. For all its disruptive rhetoric, the platform has spent the past decade embracing the exact conventions it once positioned itself to be against.

—The Conversation

US admits lapses in helicopter-plane crash that killed 67

WASHINGTON, 18 DEC

The US government acknowledged Wednesday that the Federal Aviation Administration and Army contributed to the January collision involving an airliner and a Black Hawk helicopter, which resulted in 67 fatalities. The official response to a victim's family lawsuit indicated government liability due to an air traffic controller's procedural violations. However, the filing also implicated pilots of both aircraft. At least 28 bodies were recovered from the Potomac River after the helicopter collided with an American Airlines regional jet while landing. Family attorney Robert Clifford noted that the government rightly sees itself as one of several responsible parties. *—PTI*

Congo M23 rebels withdraw from recently seized city

GOMA, 18 DEC

Rwanda-backed M23 rebels announced their withdrawal from Uvira late Wednesday, according to M23 leader Bertrand Bisimwa. He confirmed that the pullout would be completed by Thursday morning. M23 captured Uvira last week, causing over 400 deaths and displacing around 200,000 people. Local reports varied on troop movements after the rebels' exit. Bisimwa noted that a neutral force would need to assume control of the city post-withdrawal. Following a US-mediated peace agreement between Congo and Rwanda, which did not include M23, the US accused Rwanda of breaching the accord. *—PTI*

PHOTO: ANI

Ex-Nepal PM KP Oli secures 3rd term as party chairman

KATHMANDU, 18 DEC

Former prime minister KP Sharma Oli has secured a third consecutive term as chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal - Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) at the party's 11th general convention. Oli received 1,663 votes against 564 for his rival. Turnout reached 98.40 per cent, with 2,227 delegates voting. Despite a lengthy election process, Oli's position remained comfortable, although internal challenges emerged from dissenting leaders. His popularity has waned following a government rule that ended recently. *—ANI*

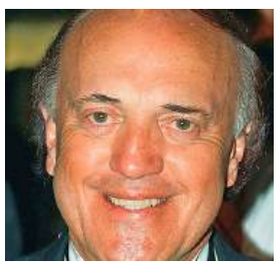


PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Pulitzer winning reporter Peter Arnett dies at 91

LOS ANGELES, 18 DEC

Peter Arnett, the Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter known for his courageous coverage of wars from Vietnam to Iraq, has died at the age of 91. He passed away on Wednesday in Newport Beach, surrounded by family, after battling prostate cancer. "He was one of the greatest war correspondents of his generation," said journalist Edith Lederer. Arnett gained prominence for his live reports during the first Gulf War in 1991, defying the exodus of Western reporters from Baghdad. He reported extensively from Vietnam and conducted controversial interviews with figures like Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. After resigning from CNN in 1999, he later taught journalism in China. He is survived by his wife Nina and their children, Elsa and Andrew. *—PTI*

Trump boasts of booming economy amid low ratings

US soldiers to get $1,776 bonus for Christmas as he lauds tariffs

WASHINGTON, 18 DEC

US President Donald Trump touted his administration's successes on immigration as he listed the various accomplishments of his second term in the White House in a year-end address to the nation, despite his approval ratings dropping to nearly their lowest point ever.

"Eleven months ago, I inherited a mess, and I'm fixing it," Trump said as he began his 19-minute special prime time address to the nation on Wednesday.

He said that he was sending a USD 1,776 bonus check to US troops for Christmas, indicating that tariffs were funding the payments as he tried to reassure a worried public about the health of the economy.

Trump said 1.45 million military service members would get the "warrior dividend before Christmas."

"The checks are already on the way," he said.

Yet his bonus payments for the troops come as millions of Americans are fretting about the costs of groceries, housing, utilities and their holiday gifts as inflation remains elevated and the labour market has meaningfully weakened in recent months.

Flanked by two Christmas trees, Trump sought to pin any worries about high inflation on his predecessor, Joe Biden. His remarks came at a crucial time as he tries to rebuild his steadily eroding popularity. Public polling shows most US adults are frustrated with his handling of the economy as inflation picked up after his tariffs raised prices and hiring slowed.

Trump brought charts with him to make the case that the economy is on an upward trajectory.

He also attacked migrants, saying that for the first time ever, the US is witnessing "reverse migration" with people leaving to their home countries. *—PTI*

US President Donald Trump addresses the nation from the White House on Wednesday PHOTO: WH

Fixed 8 wars in 10 months: Don

Trump again claimed to have ended eight wars in ten months. During his address to the nation, Trump claimed to have ended the war in Gaza "bringing for the first time in 3,000 years peace to the Middle East" and destroyed the Iran nuclear threat. He did not name the other six wars, but has previously mentioned India and Pakistan among them.

Isaacman made NASA head

Billionaire entrepreneur Jared Isaacman was confirmed by the Senate on Wednesday to be the new head of NASA. A close friend of Elon Musk, Isaacman was first nominated by Trump in 2024. However, when Trump and Musk fell out, Trump withdrew the nomination, before re-nominating Isaacman in November as their ties improved.

The arms sales include artillery rocket systems like those previously sold to Ukraine PHOTO: X @SENTDEFENDER

US sells $11.1B weapons to Taiwan

WASHINGTON, 18 DEC

The Trump administration announced a package of arms sales to Taiwan valued at over USD 11.1 billion on Wednesday, drawing an angry response from China. The package includes medium-range missiles, howitzers and drones.

The eight arms sales agreements cover 82 high-mobility artillery rocket systems, or HIMARS, and 420 Army Tactical Missile Systems, or ATACMS — similar to what the US had been providing Ukraine during the Biden administration — worth more than USD 4 billion.

They also include 60 self-propelled howitzer systems and related equipment worth at least USD 4 billion and drones valued at more than USD 1 billion.

Other sales in the package include military software valued at more than USD 1 billion, Javelin and TOW missiles worth more than USD 700 million, helicopter spare parts worth USD 96 million and refurbishment kits for Harpoon missiles worth USD 91 million.

China's Foreign Ministry attacked the "dangerous move", saying it would violate diplomatic agreements between China and the US, and affect Beijing's territorial integrity. China claims Taiwan as its territory, while Taipei asserts its sovereignty.

"This cannot save the doomed fate of Taiwan independence' but will only accelerate the push of the Taiwan Strait toward a dangerous situation of military confrontation and war," said China Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun. *—PTI*

TRUMP'S PETTY PLAQUE POLITICS

The White House installed new plaques along the Presidential Walk of Fame, featuring derogatory descriptions of former US presidents in a style reminiscent of Trump's social media posts. A plaque at the front said that the exhibit was "conceived, built, and dedicated" by Trump "as a tribute to past Presidents, good, bad and somewhere in the middle, who served our Country".

Notable descriptors include "sleepy Joe Biden" who was "by far the worst president".

The plaque adds, "But despite it all, President Trump would get Re-Elected in a Landslide, and SAVE AMERICA!" Biden's plaque did not feature a picture of him, but instead a photo of his autopen.

Similarly, Barrack Obama's plaque calls him "the most divisive" president.

However, Trump praised Republican Ronald Reagan and appeared neutral to George W Bush . True to Trump's social media writing style, the posts had random letters capitalised.

EU to meet, discuss loan for Ukraine

BRUSSELS, 18 DEC

European Union leaders are meeting on Thursday for a summit aimed at giving a massive loan to cover Ukraine's military and other financial needs for the next two years.

The leaders will also discuss migration, the bloc's enlargement policy, trade and economies. Working out how to fund the 137 billion euros (USD 160 billion) that the International Monetary Fund says Ukraine needs will be the top priority.

European Council President Antonio Costa, who is chairing Thursday's meeting in Brussels, has vowed to continue talks until an agreement is reached.

Many EU leaders are expected to demand that the billions of euros worth of frozen Russian assets held in Europe should be used to meet Ukraine's needs.

Belgium, where most of the frozen assets are held, is the main opponent of the plan. It fears that Russia will strike back and wants the EU to borrow from international markets. *— PTI*

Assange sues Nobel over peace price to Venezuela's Machado

STOCKHOLM/ WASHINGTON/ CARACAS, 18 DEC

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and Nobel Peace Prize Winner María Corina Machado PHOTO: X

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange filed a criminal complaint in Sweden against the Nobel Foundation for awarding the coveted Peace Prize to Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado on Wednesday. Assange accused the foundation turning "an instrument of peace into an instrument of war," noting how Machado has repeatedly called for US military action against Venezuela.

"Using her elevated position as the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Machado may well have tipped the balance in favour of war," Assange said in the complaint.

"Machado has continued to incite the Trump Administration to pursue its escalatory path", including by entering into a conspiracy to give the US administration access to $1.7 trillion in oil reserves and other natural resources through privatisation once Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro is ousted, the complaint, submitted to the Swedish Economic Crime Authority (Ekobrottsmyndigheten) and the Swedish War Crimes Unit (Krigsbrottsenheten), stated.

Venezuela nationalised its oil industry first in the 1970s and again in the 21st century under Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chávez.

Assange sought a freeze on USD 1.18 of pending transfers to Machado, adding that the Nobel Committee went against Alfred Nobel's will by selecting her.

Meanwhile, Trump demanded that Venezuela return assets that it seized from US oil companies years ago, justifying his announcement of a "blockade" against oil tankers travelling to or from the South American country that face American sanctions. "They took all of our oil not that long ago. And we want it back."

—Salar News with agencies

4 people were killed as US bombed a 'drug boat' in the Pacific, on Thursday

BONDI BEACH SHOOTING

Aus cracks down on hate speech

CANBERRA, 18 DEC

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese crack down on hate speech and antisemitism with reforms to the 'Plan to Combat Antisemitism,' announced after the 14 December Bondi Beach attack that killed 15 people. Acknowledging that the government could have acted sooner, Albanese outlined measures to strengthen penalties for hate speech and expand visa cancellation powers for individuals who spread division.

Two men have been charged in connection with the attack.

Key reforms include creating an aggravated hate speech offense for preachers promoting violence, increasing penalties for inciting violence, and making hate an aggravating factor in sentencing for online threats. New powers allow the Minister to cancel or refuse visas for individuals who spread "hate and division.

Family carry the coffin of 10-year-old Matilda, who was killed in the Bondi Beach mass shooting, in Sydney PHOTO: PTI

PHILIPPINES OBJECTS TO TERRORISM CHARGE

Philippine National Security Adviser Eduardo Año confirmed that Naveed Akram and his father Sajid travelled through the Philippines but dismissed claims that Mindanao is a "hotspot for violent extremism," saying there is "no evidence" they received any military training there.

Naveed is charged with 59 offences, including terrorism, while Sajid, was shot dead by police during the incident. *—Agencies*

Sex felon Ghislaine seeks release citing tainted trial

NEW YORK, 18 DEC

PHOTO: SCREENGRAP

Convicted sex-traffickers Jeffrey Epstein's longtime associate Ghislaine Maxwell has filed a habeas corpus petition to set aside her sex-trafficking conviction and end her 20-year prison sentence. The 63-year-old claims "substantial new evidence" shows her 2021 trial was tainted by withheld information and false testimonies.

Epstein was arrested on sex-trafficking charges in 2019. Maxwell was arrested the following year and convicted of sex trafficking in 2021.

"Since the conclusion of her trial, substantial new evidence has emerged from related civil actions, government disclosures, investigative reports, and documents demonstrating constitutional violations that undermined the fairness of her proceeding," the filing in Manhattan federal court said. "In the light of the full evidentiary record, no reasonable juror would have convicted her."

The filing came two days before records in her case were set to be released under President Trump's Epstein Files Transparency Act, which requires the Justice Department to disclose investigative materials, including warrants, financial records, and victim interviews. Judge Paul A. Engelmayer approved the Department's request to make the records public.—*PTI*

'UNHEALTHY' AQI OF 215

Smog hits Beijing despite years of clean-up

BEIJING, 18 DEC

Beijing was shrouded in heavy smog on Thursday with AQI climbing to a "very unhealthy" level of 215, a rare event in the Chinese capital after years of expensive cleaning up.

China's national observatory on Wednesday issued a yellow alert for heavy fog in some parts of the country, saying that thick fog is expected to cover parts of Hebei, Beijing, Tianjin, Henan, Anhui, Jiangsu, Hubei, the Sichuan Basin and Chongqing on Thursday.

Smog is rare now in Beijing, which used to witness very heavy pollution before the government shifted heavy polluting industries in 2016, spending billions of dollars.

Officials say the city's switch to natural gas or electric public heating in winters, spending over USD 1 billion, has reduced pollution.

Beijing's efforts to tackle heavy pollution were in the news in recent days in the backdrop of New Delhi witnessing a worsening pollution crisis.

The Chinese Embassy in New Delhi in a post on X on Wednesday highlighted some of the steps taken by the Chinese government, like shifting 3,000 heavy industries, and relocating Shougang, a major steel producer, out of the city to cut pollution levels.

Observers say the reasons for Beijing's pollution and that of Delhi overlap in some areas but differ in sources, geography, and seasonal drivers.

While Beijing's pollution was driven by coal-fired power plants, heavy industry and automobile emissions, Delhi's pollution is from agriculture, dust, transport, and informal industries. *— PTI*

Smog shrouds residential high-rises and railway tracks as air pollution reduces visibility in the city, in Beijing, China on Thursday PHOTO: PTI

- Smog is rare now in Beijing, which used to witness very heavy pollution before the government shifted heavy polluting industries in 2016

PHOTO: ANI

Nothing raises $8M in community funding

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

London-based consumer technology company Nothing has raised more than USD 8 million (around Rs 72 crore) in its third community investment round, adding over 5,000 new investors from more than 80 countries, the company said on Thursday. The round valued the company at USD 1.3 billion. Nothing's community investor base has now grown to around 13,000 people, who have collectively invested over USD 16 million in the company to date. Community investment allows individuals to invest in a private, unlisted company in return for equity. The funding follows Nothing's USD 200 million Series C round in September 2025, which was led by major global investors including Tiger Global, GV, Highland Europe, EQT & Qualcomm Ventures. *—PTI*

ACME Solar secures Rs 4,725 cr for renewable projects

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

ACME Solar Holdings has secured Rs 4,725 crore in debt tie-ups from leading Indian financial institutions to fund new renewable projects and optimize its capital structure. The financing package includes Rs 2,716 crore from Power Finance Corporation (PFC) for the 300 MW ACME Sigma FDRE project and Rs 800 crore from NaBFID for the 150 MW ACME Platinum Solar + ESS project. Additionally, the company secured Rs 1,209 crore from Yes Bank to refinance the operational 300 MW ACME Sikar Solar project, a move that reduces debt costs by up to 195 basis points. *—PTI*

MTAR gets Rs 310 cr order for nuclear reactors

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

MTAR Technologies announced that it has received a Rs 310 crore order from Megha Engineering & Infrastructures for the Kaiga nuclear reactors in Karnataka. The order covers the supply of various equipment for Kaiga Units 5 and 6, 700 MWe Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors. Parvat Srinivas Reddy, Managing Director of MTAR comfirmed that, "The company has received total orders aggregating to Rs 504 crore for the Kaiga - 5 & 6 reactors in the current month including an earlier order worth Rs 194 crore." MTAR has nine strategically-based manufacturing units. *—PTI*

PHOTO: ANI

Danish Khan to exit Sony Pictures Networks India

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Sony Pictures Networks India (SPNI) has announced that Danish Khan, Business Head of Sony LIV and Studio NEXT, will leave the company on 31 March, 2026, to pursue new opportunities. As part of the transition, Khan will continue working with SPNI until the end of the current financial year to ensure continuity across the businesses. Khan has spent more than two decades at SPNI across two stints, re-joining the company 10 years ago as Business Head of Sony Entertainment Television (SET). He later went on to lead Studio NEXT and, from 2019, Sony LIV. Under his leadership, Sony LIV achieved more than five-fold growth in top line revenue and a four-fold increase in monthly active users, contributing nearly a quarter of SPNI's total revenue while maintaining profitability. *—PTI*

Focus now on rebuilding: IndiGo CEO to staffers

Mass cancellation of IndiGo flights led to nationwide chaos

MUMBAI, 18 DEC

IndiGo Chief Executive Officer Pieter Elbers on Thursday said the airline's focus now is on three things -- resilience, root-cause analysis, and rebuilding, after the domestic carrier inconvenienced and caused hardship to lakhs of passengers across airports by cancelling thousands of flights earlier this month.

In a video message to employees on Thursday, Elbers said the focus of IndiGo is now on rebuilding the airline post-stabilisation of operations, and that the airline's Board has appointed an external aviation expert to conduct a comprehensive root-cause analysis.

"On 9 December, I shared the stabilization of IndiGo's operation. After that, we restored our network to 2,200 flights today (Thursday). Now we focus on three things: resilience, root cause analysis and

rebuilding (the airline)," Elbers said.

Attributing the disruptions seemingly to a "compounding effect of several factors," he said, "an external aviation expert has been appointed by the Board to conduct a comprehensive root cause analysis."

Elbers said he, along with the leadership, will travel across the network to meet the employees and understand the challenges they faced during the disruptions.

These were the employees on the ground, who faced severe backlash and public ire during the over a week-long massive disruptions at the Rahul Bhatia-controlled private carrier, as the airline failed to provide even basic amenities or proper information while abruptly cancelling hundreds of flights every day.

- IndiGo CEO Pieter Elbers Elbers said he, along with the leadership, will travel across the network to meet the employees and understand the challenges they faced during the disruptions.

IndiGo cancelled thousands of flights between 1 December and 9 December due to a lack of proper planning and crew shortages in implementing the new regulations on pilots' duty periods and rest, which were put in place from 1 November.

A DGCA panel is already probing the operational disruptions at IndiGo. *—PTI*

A SHARP GAIN

Rupee rises 12P, closes at 90.26 against USD

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The rupee appreciated 12 paise against the US dollar on Thursday, despite the broad strength of the American currency in the overseas market on suspected intervention by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

Forex traders said Brent crude oil prices hovering near USD 59 per barrel supported the domestic unit at lower levels. However, a recovery in the dollar index and weak domestic markets capped sharp gains. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 90.35 against the US dollar, then recovered some lost ground to touch an intraday high of 90.04, registering a 34 paise gain from its previous close.

At the end of trading session on Thursday, the rupee was quoted at 90.26 (provisional), registering a gain of 12 paise over its previous close.

On Wednesday, the rupee recovered 55 paise from its all-time low to close at 90.38 against the greenback.

Meanwhile, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister member Sanjeev Sanyal on Thursday said he is not concerned about the rupee at all, arguing that even China and Japan witnessed exchange rate weaknesses during their high growth phases.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, was trading 0.16 per cent higher at 98.52. *—PTI*

Markets decline amid weak global trends

MUMBAI, 18 DEC

Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty closed lower for the fourth consecutive day on Thursday amid a muted trend in global markets and uncertainty over a trade deal with the US.

Falling for the fourth day, the 30-share BSE Sensex shed 77.84 points or 0.09 per cent to settle at 84,481.81 in a volatile session. During the day, it moved between a high of 84,780.19 and a low of 84,238.43, gyrating 541.76 points.

The 50-share NSE Nifty ended flat, skidding 3 points or 0.01 per cent to 25,815.55. After a muted start, the Nifty attempted a recovery during the first half but failed to sustain higher levels later in the day.

Losses in energy, auto and pharma shares dragged indices down, while gains in IT shares helped trim losses. Select buying in financials and metals also aided recovery in the pre-close session.

Among Sensex firms, Sun Pharma declined the most by 2.74 per cent. Tata Steel fell by 1.26 per cent, Power Grid by 1.15 per cent and Asian Paints by 0.89 per cent. HDFC Bank, L&T, NTPC and Bharti Airtel were also among the laggards.

However, Tata Consultancy Services jumped 1.94 per cent, Tech Mahindra by 1.74 per cent and Infosys by 1.51 per cent. Adani Ports, Axis Bank and HCL Tech were also among the gainers.

In the broader equity market, BSE midcap gauge went up by 0.05 per cent, but smallcap index dipped 0.28 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, power declined by 1.01 per cent, followed by oil & gas (0.81 per cent), capital goods (0.80 per cent), utilities (0.75 per cent) and industrials (0.66 per cent).

However, BSE Focused IT jumped 1.24 per cent and Information Technology climbed 1.10 per cent.

Services (0.79 per cent), realty (0.33 per cent) and financial services (0.13 per cent) also advanced. *—PTI*

RBI clears Paytm's PPSL as offline, cross-border payment aggregator

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Fintech firm One97 Communications announced that its subsidiary, Paytm Payments Services Limited (PPSL), has received authorisation from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to operate as a Payment Aggregator for physical (offline) payments and cross-border transactions. This approval follows the authorisation for online payment aggregation granted to PPSL last month.

"Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on 17 December, 2025 has authorised Paytm Payments Services Limited (PPSL), a wholly-owned subsidiary of One97 Communications Limited, to operate as a Payment Aggregator for Physical (offline) payments and Cross-Border transactions (both inward and outward), in addition to the online Payment Aggregator authorisation already granted by RBI on 26 November, 2025, under the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007," Paytm stated in a regulatory filing.

With this new licence, PPSL now holds Payment Aggregator authorisations across online, offline, and cross-border segments, enabling comprehensive payment aggregation services for merchants.

PPSL initially applied for a licence to operate as a payment aggregator in November 2020, but the RBI rejected the application in November 2022, requiring the company to resubmit it in compliance with Press Note 3 under FDI rules. *—PTI*

ICICI Bank gets Rs 238 cr GST demand notice

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

ICICI Bank announced on Thursday that tax authorities have issued a demand notice of Rs 238 crore for alleged short GST payments.

On 17 December, the bank received an order under Section 73 of the Maharashtra Goods and Services Tax (GST) Act, 2017, raising a demand of Rs 237.90 crore.

This comprises Rs 216.27 crore in tax and Rs 21.63 crore as a penalty, plus applicable interest.

The bank confirmed it will take appropriate legal steps, including contesting the order via a writ petition or appeal within the prescribed timelines. *—PTI*

Silver hit fresh record of Rs 2.07 lakh/kg

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Extending the record run for the second straight day, silver surged Rs 1,800 to a fresh lifetime high of Rs 2,07,600 per kilogram in the national capital on Thursday amid sustained buying by traders, according to All India Sarafa Association.

The white metal jumped Rs 7,300 on Wednesday to breach the Rs 2 lakh per kilogram-mark for the first time, settling at Rs 2,05,800 per kg.

In the local bullion market, gold of 99.9 per cent purity remained flat at Rs 1,36,500 per 10g (inclusive of all taxes), as per the association.

In the international markets, spot gold fell USD 13.16, or 0.31 per cent, to USD 4,325.02 per ounce.

"Gold dipped to around USD 4,330 per ounce on Thursday but stayed near the record highs reached in October, as expectations of further US rate cuts and ongoing geopolitical risks supported the metal's appeal," Jigar Trivedi, Senior Research Analyst at Reliance Securities, said.

- In the local bullion market, gold of 99.9 per cent purity remained flat at Rs 1,36,500 per 10g (inclusive of all taxes), as per the association.

Meanwhile, market sentiment was influenced by comments from Federal Reserve Governor Christopher Waller, who on Wednesday supported additional interest rate cuts while noting that policymakers could proceed cautiously.

His remarks followed US labour data indicating further cooling, with the unemployment rate rising to a four-year high and November job additions failing to offset the slowdown seen in October.

Spot silver slipped 0.25 per cent to USD 66.04 per ounce in the overseas markets. In the previous session, the white metal had increased by USD 3.13, or 4.91 per cent, to hit a record of USD 66.88 per ounce. *—PTI*

Labour codes will formalise employment: Minister

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Labour Minister Mansukh Mandaviya addressed concerns regarding the recently implemented labour codes, asserting that these laws aim to formalise employment and that inspectors will act as facilitators rather than obstructers. The new codes, which augment the threshold for units to operate without government permission for layoffs, retrenchment, and closure from 100 to 300 workers, were notified on 21 November.

Mandaviya stated, "We have formalised employment in the country by increasing the number of workers to 300 per unit." He reassured that these codes will afford rights to previously unregistered workers, enabling them to access benefits similar to enrolled employees. Addressing fears of increased compliance burdens, he emphasised that inspectors are there to support industries.

The reforms encompass expanded rights for women, including the ability to work night shifts, mandatory free health check-ups for workers aged over 40, and comprehensive social security coverage for gig workers. They also guaranteed statutory minimum wages and introduced provisions for fixed-term employees to receive equal benefits as permanent staff. Key definitions for gig and platform work were established for the first time. *—PTI*

AI ADOPTION IN INDIA'S MSMES CAN UNLOCK $50B: REPORT

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption across India's 64 million Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) could generate over USD 500 billion in economic value. A new report by Oston Consulting Group (BCGX) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) found that the country needs to shift from an "adopt-first" to an "invent-first" approach.

The report, "India's Triple AI Imperative: Succeeding with AI in India", notes that despite India's fast-growing AI market, significant gaps remain in innovation and value creation.

Barriers such as digital infrastructure, low awareness, and limited skilled talent. It points out that corporates often restrict AI to micro-problem solutions instead of pursuing broader functional transformations.

The report projects a significant shift in operating models by 2026, where AI will have the first right to perform specific duties. *—PTI*

TO LEAVE LONGTIME HOME ABC

The Oscars will be streamed on YouTube from 2029

LOS ANGELES, 18 DEC

PHOTO: AI

In a seismic shift for one of television's marquee events, the Academy Awards will depart ABC and begin streaming on YouTube beginning in 2029, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced Wednesday.

ABC will continue to broadcast the annual ceremony through 2028. That year will mark the 100th Oscars.

But starting in 2029, YouTube will retain global rights to streaming the Oscars through 2033. YouTube will effectively be the home to all things Oscars, including red-carpet coverage, the Governors Awards and the Oscar nominations announcement.

"We are thrilled to enter into a multifaceted global partnership with YouTube to be the future home of the Oscars and our year-round Academy programming," said academy chief executive Bill Kramer and academy president Lynette Howell Taylor. "The Academy is an international organization, and this partnership will allow us to expand access to the work of the Academy to the largest worldwide audience possible — which will be beneficial for our Academy members and the film community."

While major award shows have added streaming partnerships, the YouTube deal marks the first of the big four — the Oscars, Grammys, Emmys and Tonys — to completely jettison broadcast television. It puts one of the most watched non-NFL broadcasts in the hands of Google. YouTube boasts some 2 billion viewers.

The Academy Awards will stream for free worldwide on YouTube, in addition to YouTube TV subscribers.

Financial terms were not disclosed. *—PTI*

DELHI'S PETROL DEALERS FLAG CHALLENGES IN 'NO PUCC, NO FUEL' RULE

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Delhi Petrol Dealers' Association (DPDA) has raised significant concerns regarding the Delhi government's directive prohibiting the sale of fuel to vehicles lacking valid pollution under control certificates (PUCC). This stringent "no PUCC, no fuel" rule, effective from Thursday, aims to combat severe air pollution in the national capital, alongside a ban on the entry of all private non-Delhi vehicles below BS VI standards.

While extending "whole-hearted support" to the government's efforts, the DPDA cautioned that enforcing the directive presents considerable challenges. It argued that as Delhi is impacted more by transboundary pollution, measures confined to the National Capital Territory are unlikely to achieve desired outcomes without a uniform approach across the entire National Capital Region.

The association highlighted that the refusal to sell essential commodities falls under Section 3 of the Essential Commodities Act, 1955, and the Motor Spirit and High-Speed Diesel Regulations, stating that "refusal of sale has to be decriminalised" for implementation to be viable. It emphasised that petrol pumps are not enforcement agencies, and such responsibilities should remain with authorities possessing statutory powers. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Ishan Kishan slams record-equalling 100 against Haryana

MUMBAI, 18 DEC

Jharkhand captain Ishan Kishan smashed a century in the final of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy against Haryana at the MCA Stadium in Pune on Thursday. The left-hander brought up his sixth T20 ton off 45 balls with a one-handed six over cover off medium-pacer Anshul Kamboj's bowling. Kishan also equalled Abhishek Sharma's record for most centuries in the history of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy by raising his fifth hundred in the tournament. He was eventually clean bowled for 101 off 49 balls by Sumit Kumar in the 15th over of Jharkhand's innings. The out-of-favour India wicketkeeper-batter has been in scorching form in the ongoing T20 domestic tournament and leads the run charts with 502 runs in 10 innings. —*PTI*

Shankara's 67 in vain as India A beat India Seniors

MUMBAI, 18 DEC

GS Shiva Shankara scored 67 off 43 balls, but his effort went in vain as India A got the better of India Seniors in the third and final match of the Physical Disability T20 series, here on Thursday. India A, who had lost both the matches of the series here at the Wankhede Stadium, posted 164 for eight in the third match and restricted the India Seniors side to 136 in 19.3 overs. Brief scores: India A 164/8 in 20 overs (Akash Sanap 32, Prasad Chavan 31, Jitendra VN 25; Sunny Goyal 3/17, Imran Khan 2/49) lost to India Seniors 136 in 19.3 overs (Shiva Shankara 67, Sunny Goyal 21; Nonsola Adil 3/40, Mohammed Sadiq 2/3, G Prashant 2/15) by 28 runs.—*PTI*

PHOTO: X/@PKF

Pakistani kabaddi player faces disciplinary action

KARACHI, 18 DEC

A popular Pakistani international kabaddi player, Ubaidullah Rajput, faces the prospect of severe disciplinary action after he appeared for an Indian team in a private tournament in Bahrain on 16 December.Ubaidullah found himself in big trouble after videos and pictures of him wearing an Indian shirt and waving the Indian flag in the GCC Cup went viral.The secretary of the Pakistan Kabbadi Federation, Rana Sarwar, said an emergency meeting of the PKR had been called on 27 December, in which the matter would be discussed and a decision taken on disciplinary action against Rajput.—*PTI*

ISPL: Ganguly joins Tiigers of Kolkata as co-owner

KOLKATA, 18 DEC

Former India captain Sourav Ganguly has joined the Tiigers of Kolkata as co-owner and mentor ahead of the third season of the Indian Street Premier League, scheduled to be held in Surat from 9 January to 6 February2026. With ISPL's T10 tennis-ball format rooted in gully cricket where instinct, timing, and decision-making define the game, his involvement is aimed at transforming raw street-level ability into a sustainable, long-term cricketing pathway."I'm excited to begin this new journey. Tennis-ball cricket has always been close to the roots of the game. That foundation is especially strong in the East and across Kolkata.—*PTI*

India look to seal series against plucky SA

Two sides clash in the fifth and final T20 International in Ahmedabad today

AHMEDABAD, 18 DEC

India would hope that the challenging home assignment against South Africa, which has exposed a few chinks in the armour and thrown up difficult questions on selection, ends on a positive note when the two sides clash in the fifth and final T20 International here on Friday.

After being blanked 0-2 in the Tests, India bounced back to win the ODI series and now have an unassailable lead 2-1 in the T20Is after the fourth game was abandoned due to poor weather conditions in Lucknow on Wednesday.

That India cannot lose the series should be comforting to embattled head coach Gautam Gambhir, given that the other two leaders in the camp skipper Suryakumar Yadav and his deputy Shubman Gill -- are battling challenges of their own with less than two months to go for the T20 World Cup.

For someone who was ranked world No.1 not so long ago, Suryakumar's form has sharply nosedived in the only format he is assured a place in the XI for India.

Having gone through 18 innings in 20 matches this year without a single half-century while averaging a poor 14.20 for his 213 runs, every failure for Suryakumar is adding to the concerns of the Indian camp. Gill's return as vice-captain in the T20I format might have been perceived as one which put Suryakumar on notice a few months ago, but the former's ordinary run with the bat since his comeback and the latest injury setback only hampers the team's cause.

A toe injury suffered before the fourth T20I is set to keep Gill out of the final T20I here, as India would want to take a cautious route, more so when there is a ready replacement for the top order slot in Sanju Samson. —*PTI*

Shubman Gill and Skipper Suryakumar Yadav are battling challenges of their own PHOTO: PTI

INDIA VS SOUTH AFRICA T20I

INDIA vs SOUTH AFRICA 5TH T20I
Match starts at
7 pm IST

HEAD TO HEAD @ AHMEDABAD

PLAYED:	37
INDIA WON:	19
SA WON:	13
NO RESULT	5
ABANDONED	1

Ahmedabad Weather Forecast

Ahmedabad's weather looks cricket-friendly for the final T20I, with clear skies and temperatures around 15°C-30°C expected during match hours, ideal playing conditions with no significant rain threat and only light winds. Dew could become a factor later in the evening, potentially aiding teams chasing under lights.The hosts will look to bounce back from a fog-affected 4th T20I that was abandoned in Lucknow, while South Africa will aim not to lose the series by winning the final match and end the series 2-2.

Satwik-Chirag outwit Alfian-Fikri

HANGZHOU, 18 DEC

India's Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty dished out a solid performance to outwit the Indonesian pair of Fajar Alfian and Muhammad Shohibul Fikri in their second Group B match to inch closer to the knockout stage of the BWF World Tour Finals here Thursday.

The former world No. 1 Indian pair shored up their defence and dominated the proceedings to register a 21-11, 16-21, 21-11 win over world No. 8 Alfian and Fikri in the men's doubles match that lasted an hour. With two wins from two matches, Satwik and Chirag now lead the group and have built a considerable advantage in points difference. Third seeds Satwik and Chirag will face second seeds Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik in their last group match on Friday. Facing a pair known for their exceptional front-court skills, the onus was on Chirag, but he was ably supported by Satwik, who was simply flawless in the evening. The Indians changed their aggressive approach to a more blended mix of shots and pace to counter the Indonesians. Two deep pushes from Chirag and a series of shots buried at the net from the nervy Indonesians saw India make a 6-0 start in the opening game. —*PTI*

BCCI is not responsible for Lucknow T20I refund: Saikia

LUCKNOW, 18 DEC

The BCCI Secretary Devajit Saikia has confirmed that the Uttar Pradesh Cricket Association, UPCA, will handle refunds for ticket holders after fog and poor visibility led to the abandonment of the fourth T20I between India and South Africa. BCCI is not responsible for Lucknow T20I refund.

The abandonment of the match caused frustration among spectators, who were

expecting a refund for their tickets. According to the BCCI's refund policy, spectators are eligible for reimbursement (minus fees) if a match is cancelled or abandoned before a single ball is bowled.

"That is under the domain of the state cricket association, which is UPCA. So, this game's hosting state is the UPCA. So, they will be able to tell you about this, and they are the competent authority. Everything in ticketing is done by the state association, as the BCCI just gives them the hosting rights and all these things are taken care of and are under the domain of the state association," Saikia was quoted as saying to IANS on Thursday.—*PTI*

Lyon moves to 2nd on Australia's all-time bowling list

ADELAIDE, 18 DEC

Nathan Lyon and Pat Cummins celebrated personal milestones as Australia continued to dominate England in the ongoing Ashes series during the second day of the third Ashes Test in Adelaide.

Lyon, the 38-year-old off-spinner, took two wickets in an over to go past former pacer Glenn McGrath (563) and become the second-most successful bowler in Test cricket for Australia in his 141st Test. Only Shane Warner (708), the legendary leg-spinner, is ahead of Lyon. Skipper Pat Cummins picked up three wickets, overtaking former speedster Brett Lee (310) and moving with one scalp of matching the tally of Mitchell Johnson (313), the former left-arm fast bowler who is in sixth place.

In his fourth over, he found the outside edge of England opener Zak Crawley's bat before wicketkeeper Alex Carey completed a simple catch. In his sixth over, the 32-year-old pacer went past Lee's tally by removing Joe Root in the same fashion.

England 213 for 8 (Stokes 45*, Brook 45, Archer 30*, Cummins 3-54, Boland 2-31, Lyon 2-51) trail Australia 371 (Carey 106, Khawaja 82, Archer 5-53) by 158 runs —*PTI*

Australia's Nathan Lyon celebrates after dismissing England opener Ben Duckett PHOTO: PTI

Latham and Conway put NZ in control

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, 18 DEC

Tom Latham took a close look at the pitch at Bay Oval Thursday and made the inspired decision to bat first.

Inspired ultimately because at stumps, New Zealand was 334-1 against West Indies, Devon Conway was 178 not out, and nightwatchman Jacob Duffy was 9.

Latham and Conway put on 323 for New Zealand's first wicket in a partnership that ended just three overs from stumps when Latham was out for 137. The partnership was New Zealand's second-highest opening stand in tests and the highest for all wickets and all teams in 2025.

Latham's decision to bat first was bold because the pitch was unusually green for Bay Oval. Bold because he had to back his play, pad up, and bat first. Inspired also because the pitch's appearance was deceptive. It was much drier under its carpet of grass than it outwardly appeared. West Indies had planned to bowl first, anyway. New Zealand captains don't usually choose to bat first after winning the toss in tests at home.

That was an opening stand of 200 or more, of which there have been only six for New Zealand. Latham has been part of two.

There have been only two of 300 or more. Latham and Conway on Thursday approached the highest, 387, between Glenn Turner and Terry Jarvis against the West Indies at Georgetown in 1972.

New Zealand 334 for 1 (Conway, 178*, Latham 137, Roach 1-63) vs West Indies.—*PTI*

New Zealand's Tom Latham and Devon Conway put on a 323-run opening partnership PHOTO: PTI

CIDCO Open: Patil moves into joint lead with Ahlawat

NAVI MUMBAI, 18 DEC

Rohan Dhole Patil produced an exceptional seven-under 64 to move into the joint lead along with Veer Ahlawat after the third round of the CIDCO Open here on Thursday.

Pune's Patil (70-69-64), searching for his maiden title, eclipsed the previous course record of 65 set by Ahlawat (65-65-73) in round one at the Kharghar Valley Golf Course (KVGC), which is hosting its first professional event.

Patil thus jumped nine spots from his overnight tied 10th place, even as Gurugram-based Veer, the sole leader for the first two days, held on to his position at the top of the leaderboard.

The two golfers had a three-day total of 10-under 203.

Subash Tamang (71-68-65) of Nepal, another player looking for his first win, also made major gains with his 65 on day three that lifted him seven spots on the leaderboard with his total reading nine-under 204.

Italy's Michele Ortolani (67-66-72) ended the day a further shot back in fourth place at eight-under 205.

Patil, who trailed the leader by nine shots at the start of the third round, made steady gains on the front-nine where he collected three birdies by landing it close to the pins consistently. —*PTI*

FIFA INTERCONTINENTAL CUP

PSG's Khvicha Kvaratskhelia lifts the trophy after winning the FIFA Intercontinental Cup final soccer match between Flamengo and Paris Saint-Germain in Doha, Qatar. PSG goalkeeper Matvei Safonov saved four penalties as PSG edged out Brazilians Flamengo 2-1 PHOTO: PTI

Samrat's gold-winning show rated top 5 by ISSF

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Indian pistol shooter Samrat Rana's showing at the World Championships in Cairo last month has been rated among the top five performances of the year on Thursday by the International Shooting Sport Federation.

The 20-year-old marksman from Karnal in Haryana made history by winning the men's 10m air pistol gold at the Worlds, becoming the first Indian to clinch a senior individual world title in the event.

The ace shooter, whose journey began when his father built him a basic shooting range in their backyard, also bagged the mixed team silver with multiple Asian medallist Esha Singh in his favourite event at the same venue.

"The only man to defeat Hu Kai (China) this season, Samrat Rana, was composed under pressure to pull off an upset no one expected," said ISSF, while revealing the top-five performers of the season.

"The 20-year-old had a narrow lead in the men's 10m air pistol final at the ISSF World Championship and would be closely matched by Hu, before the Chinese took the lead with six shots to go. —*PTI*

TIGHTENS SELECTION

WFI makes presence at national camp mandatory

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Wrestling Federation of India, WFI, has rolled out a revised selection policy that mandates compulsory attendance at national coaching camps for eligibility, prohibits independent training outside designated camps, and requires Olympic quota winners to face a final one-bout selection trial.

The new framework was deliberated and approved at the WFI's recent General Council meeting held alongside the National Championships in Ahmedabad. The policy has also been shared with the Sports Authority of India, SAI, for its feedback and review.

"Participation in the National Coaching Camp is mandatory for all wrestlers, including elite and iconic athletes. To be eligible for the camp, a wrestler must have won a medal in the National Championship of the concerned year," the policy under the sub-head National Coaching Camps stated. "Once selected, wrestlers are required to train exclusively at the designated national camp. No athlete is permitted to train independently at any other venue," it added. The stipulation implies that wrestlers returning to competition, including Vinesh Phogat, who recently announced her comeback from retirement, will need to establish their credentials at the domestic level before being considered for national selection. No athlete can sit on past achievements.

In the past, a few athletes had asked for an exemption, which is not fair to up-and-coming wrestlers. WFI will give equal opportunity to all," a WFI official told PTI. —*PTI*

ECUADOR FOOTBALLER PINEIDA SHOT DEAD IN GANG VIOLENCE

QUITO, 18 DEC

Ecuadorian police said on Wednesday that Mario Pineida, a 33-year-old Barcelona de Guayaquil defender, was shot dead in an apparent attack as violence escalates in the Andean nation. Another person who police did not identify was also killed in the incident, and a third was wounded. Ecuador's Interior Ministry confirmed Pineida's death without providing details. Barcelona de Guayaquil said in a statement that its fans are saddened by Pineida's death. —*PTI*